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# Silence and Language in the Philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty

By

**Stephen A. Noble**

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Philosophy

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1993

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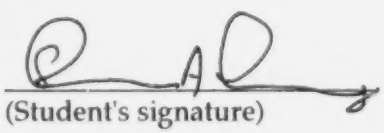

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Perhaps all men, as well as the man of letters, can only be present to the world and others through language; and perhaps in everyone language is the basic function which constructs a life and its work and transforms even the problems of our existence into life's motives.

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Literary use of Language"

Human speech is like a chipped kettle drum on which we bang crude rhythms for bears to dance to while we long to make music that will melt the stars.

– Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Silence and Language in the Philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty" submitted by Stephen A. Noble in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Robert Burch (Supervisor)

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Margaret van De Pitte (Committee member)

September 20th, 1993

## Acknowledgements and Dedication

Although it may be unorthodox to provide acknowledgements and a dedication with a humble M.A. thesis, the work presented here is significant enough to the author that it merits nothing less; furthermore, even though I could never hold anyone but myself responsible for the present work, a number of people and organizations have helped me out significantly both before and during the process of writing it, whom I would like to acknowledge formally and thank.

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and my mother and father, who were always willing to help in any way they could.

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Stephen A. Noble
Edmonton, Alberta
Summer 1993

## Abstract

From its initial appearance in the Phénoménologie de la perception, to its characterization in Signes and La Prose du monde as well as other writings during the same period, and finally to its role in Le Visible et l'invisible, the present work demonstrates how the intertwining of language and silence is a theme that grows in importance in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and argues that it is a key to understanding the unity of his thinking as well as the shifts in perspective that occur in its development between the Phénoménologie de la perception and Le Visible et l'invisible.

The silence in question is not at all characterized negatively as a lack, it does not refer to the mere absence of words or sounds; rather, it is of an entirely different nature. In the present work I endeavour to disclose and discuss various meanings of this silence as well as the sense in which silence is intimately and inextricably interwoven with language. Since the theme is worked out most clearly for the first time in the period following the publication of the Phénoménologie de la perception in 1945, it is therefore on the works of this period that I concentrate.

Since during this time Merleau-Ponty was influenced enormously by Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, I show precisely how language is understood as indirect rather than direct, and discuss how silence arises from a highly structured, somewhat autonomous linguistic system.

As influential as this structuralist model of language may be, I further demonstrate how crucial a phenomenological understanding of silence remains to Merleau-Ponty. I raise questions over the traditional phenomenological understanding of the original silence of our lived experience, arguing that the notion implies the relative absence of real meaning in existence and, furthermore, that the act of the creative use of language is essentially a form of existential self-making.

In order to synthesize my conclusions and formulate a (Merleau-Pontyean) conception of the speaking subject, I provide the poststructuralist conception of the speaking subject as a foil, showing how a Merleau-Pontyean conception is more consistent.

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*Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| Œ. | L'Œil et l'esprit (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). |
| P.M. | La Prose du monde (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). |
| P.P. | "Le Primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques." In Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie, March 1947, 119-153. |
| Ph.P. | Phénoménologie de la perception (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). |
| R.C.C.F. | Résumés de cours, Collège de France, 1952-1960 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968). |
| R.M.M. | "Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty." In Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale, No. 4 (1962), 400-409. |
| S. | Signes (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). |
| V.I. | Le Visible et l'invisible (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). |

## ✣ Introduction ✣

The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty stands at a highly significant place in the development of twentieth century philosophy. His existential phenomenology represents an attempt to overcome once and for all the bifurcation between mind and body, between subject and object, between self and world postulated by Descartes in his (in)famous Meditations, a work marking the beginning of modern philosophy. It is nevertheless true that the desire to resolve this traditional dichotomous understanding of the relationship between self and world is not particular to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project; indeed, it is a trait visible in all the German idealists as well as in Sartre and Heidegger. What is distinctive about Merleau-Ponty's endeavour, however, is that the effort to overcome this traditional dichotomy is undertaken without embracing one form of reductionism or another, that is, without lapsing into either idealism or materialism, and without affirming an absolute rift between being and beings as Heidegger does by postulating the ontological difference. One of the most crucial notions to Merleau-Ponty's project in the Phénoménologie de la perception becomes that of the body.[1] Yet the notion of the body, which is referred to as "the body proper," acquires a radically new meaning; it comes

[1] The Phénoménologie, of course, is not Merleau-Ponty's first major work. In the work that has this distinction, La Structure du comportement, Merleau-Ponty finds little place for language. Therefore, since the present work takes language as its central theme, I shall not introduce La Structure du comportement.

to be understood as the locus where intellectual consciousness and perceptual consciousness are inextricably bound together. Consciousness thus guards its intentionality, but it becomes primarily a bodily intentionality. Essentially, then, what Merleau-Ponty aims to do is trace the traditional *cogito* to a bodily *cogito*, which he calls the tacit *cogito*, that lies at the level of pre-reflective, perceptual experience (Langer, 161).

It is in this very realm of perceptual experience where we first encounter the notion of silence. By silence Merleau-Ponty does *not* intend the absence of words; rather, the notion of silence -- at least in the Phénoménologie to begin with -- qualifies the nature of our primordial experience of the world, an experience preceding all reflection, which all our words and theories are but attempts to describe and qualify. The notion of silence therefore characterizes our world which precedes knowledge, of which our knowledge always speaks (Ph.P., iii).

Later in his career, expressing discontentment over the conclusions of the Phénoménologie, Merleau-Ponty admits that the problems of that work remain insoluble because he espoused as his starting-point the bifurcation between subject and object (V.I., 253). In Le Visible et l'invisible, the manuscript upon which he was working before his untimely death in 1961, Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects the tacit *cogito* and tries instead to reach a level of silence underlying the distinction of consciousness from its intentional object, a distinction which, as he admits, even the tacit *cogito* implies (Langer, 161). By this time, however, although the notion of silence retains similarities to the way in which it was construed in the Phénoménologie, its essential meaning is nevertheless quite different. Since Le Visible et l'invisible is essentially an ontological enquiry, it is not surprising that in this work silence characterizes the "invisible substructure of

brute Being" with which any authentic act of expression is inextricably bound (Langer, 161).

Yet the movement away from the tacit *cogito* towards a level of silence that would undercut the dichotomy between subject and object, and indeed any such dichotomous way of thinking, is formulated for the first time in the work of the period between the Phénoménologie and Le Visible et l'invisible. During this period Merleau-Ponty wholeheartedly embraces the philosophical questions surrounding language. Indeed, no longer treating language as simply one example of the specifically human institution of meaning, but as the privileged model *par excellence* of our entire experience of meaning, he attempts "to present phenomenology as a generalized theory of language" (Edie, 1976, 90). Although the topic of language figures prominently throughout Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, it is specifically during this period, which I shall call the middle period, that it first moves into a central position.[2] And one of the most important themes of this period is the paradoxical relationship between silence and language.

Since Le Visible et l'invisible comprises only the introductory first part of Merleau-Ponty's projected ontology, along with some working notes, I have determined to study the relationship between language and silence in the work of the middle period, for it is during this period that it moves into a central position for the first time. Moreover, in the work of the middle period the relationship stands at a crucial juncture, a pivotal point that represents Merleau-Ponty's first shift in perspective away from the approach adopted in the Phénoménologie and that subsequently leads him to the development of a phenomenological ontology. Determining how this theme fits into the

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[2] A justification of this characterization of periods in Merleau-Ponty's writings in which language figures as a prominent theme is given below, in Chapter I.

development of Merleau-Ponty's thought will thus occupy the first part of this enquiry.

Perhaps the most important occurrence during this period is Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics. Merleau-Ponty's endeavour to incorporate some of the basic elements of Saussure's structuralism into the framework of his own phenomenology adds an essential dimension to the relationship of language and silence. One of the most important arguments presented in this regard is the argument against language being construed primarily as an instrument we use to translate preformed thoughts or a tool we use with the power of direct reference. Instead, following Saussure, language is characterized by Merleau-Ponty as a highly structured and somewhat autonomous system in which meaning arises due to the differences between terms. Consequently, no longer is language primarily understood as a tool of direct reference, but as a system where meaning arises indirectly. It is within this highly structured, allusive system of differences that Merleau-Ponty finds another type of silence, and again it is a silence that is inextricably bound to language. In the second chapter of this enquiry I shall present the details of this adoption of Saussurian principles and demonstrate the influence it has upon Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the role and meaning of silence in a language that is essentially indirect.

Closely linked to these structural considerations are Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological considerations of silence. The primordial silence of our lived experience is absolutely essential to language, since it is not only tacitly present in language in every moment that language is employed, but is also that which the speaker or writer's language attempts to bring to expression. What then is this silence that permeates our lived experience of language? In

the third chapter of this enquiry I shall endeavour to make this relationship explicit and, in doing so, to raise some questions about how this primordial experience is understood in phenomenological philosophy.

One of the crucial points underlying the enquiry in this third chapter is Merleau-Ponty's contention that there is one specific type of language that brings us closest to the primordial silence of lived experience, and this, he says, is poetry and literary prose. But why specifically these types of writing? Because the literary experience of writing involves at every moment an attempt to be original and draw meaning from experience, to speak the world anew, there exists in this form of writing a close attention paid by the writer to our primordial experience of the world in order to bring this experience to expression. Since this experience itself is silent -- and in precisely what sense this is so we shall see -- it is literary writing which most consistently makes an attempt to stare this silence in the face to determine its original meaning. It is in this sense, then, that the question of language and silence leads to that of lived experience and expression, and in particular for the chapter in question, how these questions are reduced to the question of writing, and indeed not just any writing, but creative writing. In this part of the enquiry, then, in order to reveal this experience in all its richness, and indeed to remain faithful to Merleau-Ponty's general contention as I have here explained it, a certain amount of phenomenological writing will be necessary. And the choice I have made is of exegetical phenomenological writing, which will allow for a dialogue between the texts of other writers of literary prose and my own phenomenological writing.

For all of the importance that Merleau-Ponty allotted to the relationship between language and silence he does little to make explicit the conception of the speaking subject who employs language. In the fourth

chapter I shall make such a conception explicit. But in order to bring Merleau-Ponty's conception to the fore, I shall use as a foil a certain conception of the speaking subject prominent in poststructuralism. The contrast between poststructuralism and Merleau-Ponty is not unmotivated, for in the middle period, by putting language in a central position in his philosophical analyses and by trying to respond to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, Merleau-Ponty's work represents a general tendency of twentieth century continental thought. As one critic writes: "as the transcendental subject receded language flooded in to take its place" (Dillon, ix). The point of the contrast between the resulting Merleau-Pontyean conception of the speaking subject and the general poststructuralist conception is to reveal an interesting contrast and suggest possibilities for a critique. Most of all, however, it shall serve as a synthesis of my prior conclusions, from the transformation in the notion of subjectivity, to the implications of the structural silence of language and the silence of lived experience, and finally to the very meaning of being a speaking subject.

✣ I ✣

## Tracing the Themes of Silence and Language in the Development of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty's writings on the philosophy of language can be classified generally into an early, middle and late period. For the purposes of the present work my interest will focus upon the writings of the middle period, the period during which language becomes the major theme of his enquiries. It would be well, then, to begin by providing an overview of these three periods in order to clarify the stage at which my interest lies and to indicate the importance of this stage in the development of his thought.[1]

The central problem of Phénoménologie de la perception is the following: "il faut que nous retrouvions l'origine de l'objet au cœur même de notre expérience, que nous décrivions l'apparition de l'être et que nous comprenions comment paradoxalement il y a *pour nous de l'en soi*" (Ph.P., 86).

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[1] This type of categorization was first instituted by James M. Edie in his "Forward" to Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language (xi-xxxii), then restated by him in Speaking and Meaning (75). It was further refined, due to the appearance of subsequent publications, by Hugh J. Silverman in an article entitled "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language" (122-141). Silverman's categorization is a *refinement* of Edie's in the sense that Silverman splits the middle period into an earlier and later segment. It is during this earlier segment, argues Silverman, that Merleau-Ponty first thematizes the question of communication, entering explicitly "upon a consideration of the philosophical and psychological aspects of communication" (126). Edie's categorization, although it does take into account the psychological issues of language acquisition and use (1976, esp. 82-89), does not specifically heed the notion of communication. Nevertheless, the role of communication is not only present in this early segment of the middle period; it recurs in the latter segment, where indirect language becomes the major theme.

The task of the work is therefore to discover how objects and meanings emerge from our perceptual involvement with the life-world, or *Lebenswelt*, and become sedimented in our lives. It is one of Merleau-Ponty's basic contentions that the questions surrounding the relationship of consciousness and nature, questions so long disputed amongst philosophers, have "become a problem of the *genesis of meanings* on the basis of perception" (Bannan, 60). One of the major elements of the work disclosed by this contention is the very manner in which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is to be understood as a *genetic* phenomenology: it is the attempt to understand not only consciousness but also the process by which consciousness *institutes* meaning (Bannan, 60).[2] Another crucial element of the work revealed by this contention is the thesis of the primacy of perception. Yet the centrality of perception in no wise implies a form of empirical reductionism. Explaining this thesis, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> nous exprimons en ces termes [i.e., le primat de la perception] que l'expérience de la perception nous remet en présence du moment où se constituent pour nous les choses, les vérités, les biens, qu'elle nous rend un *logos* à l'état naissant, qu'elle nous enseigne, hors de tout dogmatisme, les conditions vraies de l'objectivité elle-même, qu'elle nous rappelle les tâches de la connaissance et de l'action. Il ne s'agit pas de réduire le savoir humain au sentir, mais d'assister à la naissance de ce savoir, de nous la rendre aussi sensible que le sensible, de reconquérir la conscience de la rationalité (P.P., 133).

The thesis of the primacy of perception makes it possible for Merleau-Ponty to adopt a different starting-point than Husserl and thereby avoid some

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[2] Cf. Ph. P., i-ii.

of the apparently interminable problems he fell into. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty seeks to avoid the unhappy fate of Husserl's phenomenology in Méditations Cartésiennes, where Husserl's attempts to establish a truly inter-subjective world fail;[3] in the "Avant-propos" of the Phénoménologie Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that his own phenomenological philosophy will avoid the pure consciousness of Husserl's transcendental idealism and begin *in* the inter-subjective life-world with consciousness incarnate. Thus, one principal discovery resulting from his study is that of "le corps propre," corporeity as subjectivity and the locus of signification and meaning (Madison, 85). The locus of perception is "the body proper" and through our body we experience the phenomenal field. In proposing this point of view Merleau-Ponty is effectively arguing that "the intentionality of consciousness is first and foremost a bodily intentionality" (Langer, xiv). Therefore, the contention forecloses the possibility of an original disembodied thinker: "the perceiver is not a pure thinker but a body-subject" (Langer, xv).

The attempt to overcome Husserl by existentializing transcendental consciousness and introducing the notion of embodiment is closely linked, as one might expect, with the anti-Cartesian argument of the whole work. When in his Meditations on First Philosophy Descartes proposes the radical split between mind and body, the very essence of selfhood becomes associated with the mind, while the body is ignominiously relegated to the level of an object.[4] Merleau-Ponty argues that as a consequence of this bifurcation the Cartesian model of selfhood comprises only two possible senses of the verb "to exist": either one exists as object, as a body, or one exists as consciousness, as a thinking subject (Ph.P., 231). And it is this very dichotomy that Merleau-

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[3] V. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this matter in Ph.P., v-ix.

[4] V. particularly Descartes' "Second Meditation" in Meditations on First Philosophy (61-66).

Ponty takes exception to. Consequently, one crucial aspect of his project is to undercut the indubitable Cartesian starting-point of a disembodied consciousness by transforming the notion of the *cogito* so that in its very formulation it becomes essentially linked with the body. Effectively, then, what he aims to do is trace "the traditional *cogito* to a bodily, tacit *cogito* operative at the level of perceptual experience" (Langer, 161).

Emerging from these basic contentions is an inextricable tie between consciousness and the body. In one place Merleau-Ponty does refer to this relation as a "union" (Ph.P., 232) -- a turn of phrase that hints infelicitously at the traditionally understood union of mind and body -- and so it would be well to consider what type of a union this is. For Merleau-Ponty, the notions of consciousness (or mind) and body are "ideal-types, neither of which can exist in isolation from the other, and both of which function as two subordinate structures which can be integrated in different ways and to different degrees" (Spurling, 23). On one hand, then, consciousness cannot be thought of except as embodied (for example, in such statements as "I am my body"); but on the other hand, there is an identifiable distinction between consciousness and the body, although each remains intrinsically related with the other (for example, in such phrases as "I have a body") (Spurling, 23). As Merleau-Ponty himself explains:

> je suis donc mon corps, au moins dans toute la mesure où j'ai un acquis et réciproquement mon corps est comme un sujet naturel, comme une esquisse provisoire de mon être total. Ainsi l'expérience du corps propre s'oppose au movement réflexif qui dégage l'objet du sujet et le sujet de l'objet, et qui ne nous donne que la pensée du corps ou le corps en idée et non pas l'expérience du corps ou le corps en réalité (Ph.P., 231).

Yet it is crucial to clarify further the sense in which Merleau-Ponty understands this return to perception and his reconstrual of the traditional understanding of the body as the body proper, for even he had his difficulties making himself clear to his contemporaries. After an address to the *Société française de Philosophie* entitled "Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques," an address whose purpose is to outline, explain and defend the argument of the Phénoménologie, one of his eminent contemporaries expressed qualms and doubts, which have not been uncommon amongst subsequent critics:

> Merleau-Ponty change, invertit le sens ordinaire de ce que nous appelons la philosophie. La philosophie est née des difficultés concernant la perception vulgaire; c'est à partir de la perception vulgaire et en prenant ses distances vis-à-vis de cette perception qu'on a d'abord philosophé. Le premier des philosophes, Platon, notre ancêtre à tous, a philosophé de cette façon. Loin de vouloir revenir à une perception immédiate, à une perception vécue, il partait des insuffisances de cette perception vécue pour arriver à une conception du monde intelligible qui fût cohérente, qui satisfît la raison, qui supposât une autre faculté de connaitre que la perception elle-même. Vous prenez, vous, cet idéalisme platonicien et vous suivez le chemin précisément inverse: vous essayez de le réintégrer dans la perception, et je crois que c'est là que se présentent à proprement parler toutes les difficultés (P.P., 136).

First of all, the passage presents a serious difficulty in the sense that it is not truly correct to say that Merleau-Ponty merely *inverts* the ordinary meaning of philosophy. To say so risks interpreting him as adopting an empirical standpoint rather than an intellectualist one -- and this is precisely what he

does not do.[5] His "inversion" is rather a re-thinking of the traditional dichotomy between the perceived world and the intelligible world -- in no wise does he attempt to reduce one to the other.

Unfortunately, however, this very attempt is what causes him problems, as the above passage hints at towards the end. The major difficulty is that although Merleau-Ponty insists upon the importance of perception and the body proper as the locus of subjectivity, he has not given up the framework of transcendental philosophy, wherein consciousness constitutes meaning. The difficulty, as Merleau-Ponty himself realizes, lies in clearly outlining the relation between intellectual consciousness and perceptual consciousness (P.P., 126-127) without reducing one to the other in any way whatsoever. What is at issue, essentially, is "the question of the relation of a given consciousness to itself," (Bannan, 147), that is, how consciousness turns back towards itself to reflect upon itself when it is essentially incarnate. This objection is discussed by Alphonse de Waelhens in the following terms: "cette objection conteste la possibilité de définir la perception à la façon de Merleau-Ponty et, à la fois, d'en écrire la phénoménologie. Celle-ci en effet, suppose, et de toute évidence, la réflexion ou le retour du sujet percevant sur lui-même" (399).[6]

Couched within the general problematic of these issues, then, the first period of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language culminates in the chapter of the Phénoménologie entitled "Le corps comme expression et parole." Although many aspects of this chapter recur in the work of the middle period, the first formulation of his phenomenology of language occurs in a

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[5] In Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings, John Sallis provides an extensive discussion of the care that is required in thinking about Merleau-Ponty's project as an *inversion* of traditional philosophical tendencies (27-42).

[6] Cf. the discussion of this point provided in Bannan, 146-150.

significantly different context. Embedded within the argument of the Phénoménologie, subsumed under the thesis of the primacy of perception, it follows that language is important to Merleau-Ponty *only* in the manner in which it is related to the body, to perception and to lived experience. As James M. Edie explains in Speaking and Meaning:

> in his chapter on "The Body as Expression and Speech" [...] it is [...] clear that Merleau-Ponty's interest in language is limited to an investigation of the role that speech-acts play in the bodily and perceptual constitution of our lived-world, of how the structures of speaking are related to, embedded in, and affect perception (77).

It is in this context of a strict relationship to the varied forms of perceptual experience that for the first time the reader is introduced to an apparently paradoxical relationship between language and silence. Merleau-Ponty contends that our understanding of what it means to be a human being will remain superficial if we do not succeed in discovering, beneath the clamour of our words, "le silence primordial" (Ph.P., 214). The primordial silence he refers to is the pre-objective world of our lived experience, our experience of the world that precedes language, which all our words and theories are attempts to articulate and explain: "revenir aux choses mêmes, c'est revenir à ce monde avant la connaissance dont la connaissance parle toujours" (Ph.P., iii).[7] To be sure, Merleau-Ponty is greatly indebted to Husserl for this

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[7] When Merleau-Ponty talks of the things themselves it must be pointed out that his understanding of this notion is unique. Unlike Kant, he does not postulate a noumenal realm of things in themselves lying behind the phenomena; and unlike Husserl, who seeks to avoid the Kantian tendency to go beyond our experience, he does not ground the things themselves in meaning-giving acts of a transcendental consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the things themselves is subsumed under the thesis of the primacy of perception. Nowhere is this more evident than in his discussion of the eidetic reduction given in the "Avant-propos"

concept; yet, as we have seen, he has already removed himself from the Husserl of Méditations Cartésiennes. Therefore, when the theme of the primordial silence of our pre-linguistic experience arises in the Phénoménologie and is associated with language, as Edie notes in the above passage, Merleau-Ponty is necessarily restricted to thinking about language in terms of how it relates to our bodily and perceptual constitution of the life-world.

Yet his theory of language plays another vital role during this period, a role not mentioned by Edie, namely, to develop the anti-Cartesian argument of the work. As we have seen above, this argument is intimately related both to Merleau-Ponty's efforts to explicate the structures of experience of the body proper and to his development of the notion of the tacit *cogito*, rather than of a pure consciousness, as the locus of subjectivity. At the beginning of this chapter he clearly outlines one of the argument's major aims: "en cherchant à décrire le phénomène de la parole et l'acte exprès de signification, nous aurons chance de *dépasser* définitivement la dichotomie classique du sujet et de l'objet" (203, emphasis added).[8] How then do Merleau-Ponty's meditations

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of the Phénoménologie. Although for Husserl the essence of a thing is understood as "a lived *meaning*-structure, the universal features of that thing as we experience it" (Reeder, 9), the experience in question is nevertheless that of the transcendental ego. Furthermore, central to Husserl's account of the meaning of the term "essence" is its construal as a structure of possibility. Yet Merleau-Ponty makes it quite clear in his discussion of the reduction that he is opposed to this understanding: "chercher l'essence du monde, ce n'est pas chercher ce qu'il est en idée, une fois que nous l'avons réduit en thème de discours, c'est chercher ce qu'il est en fait pour nous avant toute thématisation" (Ph.P., x). This characterization makes it quite clear that what he is returning to is his original lived experience of concrete objects, which his embodied consciousness encounters in perception.

[8] Cf. Don Ihde's discussion of this theme in "Singing the World: Language and Perception" (62-63). It would also be well to note that the verb *dépasser* would best be translated as "to leave behind" or "to go beyond." One could very well read into this term the sense of the movement of quasi-dialectic. Merleau-Ponty could be interpreted here as hinting that his own position is a new synthesis *beyond* both empiricism and intellectualism, a position that undercuts the distinction between subject and object postulated in different ways in each of these respective theories.

on language contribute to his important bid to overcome this (in)famous dichotomy? A brief synopsis shall suffice to demonstrate the central issues.

It has been a fundamental lesson of Cartesianism that thought and body are juxtaposed, and this is one lesson in particular that Merleau-Ponty wants us to unlearn. His considerations of speech and expression definitively undermine the traditional view of the body "as an agglomeration of self-enclosed particles or a network of third person processes" (Langer, 65). Although speech and gesturing have always been understood as transfiguring the body, such transformations "were deemed to be a disclosing of the thought or soul, which was itself considered to be essentially incorporeal," and as such a temporary resident of the body merely shining through it (Langer, 65). Part of the purpose of the chapter is to rework the notion of "thinking" in order to demonstrate that there is no such category as an unambiguously preformed activity of thinking that precedes linguistic expression and, furthermore, to show that the body is essentially linked to thought, that it is not merely a vehicle through which thought is expressed. Explains Merleau-Ponty: "qu'exprime donc le langage, s'il n'exprime pas des pensées? Il présente ou plutôt il *est* la prise de position du sujet dans le monde de ses significations" (Ph. P., 225). One of the argument's essential features involves showing that the body itself (i.e., the body proper) is understood as thought rather than merely an external indicator thereof; his basic contention is that "in the absence of any immanent meaning, the body would be utterly incapable of projecting and communicating meaning" (Langer, 65). Summing up the chapter, then, without mincing his words, Merleau-Ponty explains: "c'est [le corps] qui montre, [le corps] qui parle, voilà ce que nous avons

appris dans ce chapitre" (230).[9] Having expounded this point of view, he closes the chapter by asking the following pointed question, which cuts to Cartesianism's very core: "mais si notre union avec le corps est substantielle, comment pourrions-nous éprouver en nous-mêmes une âme pure et de là accéder à un Esprit absolu?" (232). The question, of course, is rhetorical, and Merleau-Ponty hopes that the absurdity of an affirmative answer to it will be as evident to his readers as the consequent unfavourable fate of Cartesianism.

However central and decisive the anti-Cartesian element of the Phénoménologie may be, we learn later from Merleau-Ponty himself that, ironically, it is his very preoccupation with the basic tenets of Cartesianism, namely, with the dichotomy between subject and object, that ultimately prevents the issues posed in this work from being resolved. This profound realization is found in the working notes to Le Visible et l'invisible: "les problèmes posées dans *Ph.P.* sont indissolubles parce que j'y pars de la distinction 'conscience'--'object'" (V.I., 253).[10] Consequently, Merleau-Ponty reasons that if our philosophical endeavours remain directed at determining the nature of the relations existing between a "subjective" realm on one hand and an "objective" realm on the other, our enquiries will continue to be fraught with difficulties. Instead, he concludes, an entirely new approach is required, one that undercuts this fundamental dichotomy:

> ce sont ces problèmes mêmes qu'il faut déclasser en demandant: *qu'est-ce que* le prétendu conditionnement *objectif*? Réponse: c'est

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[9] It must be noted that in stating this Merleau-Ponty is *not* simply reducing consciousness to matter or mind to body. Once again, the body of which he speaks here is the locus of incarnate subjectivity, the very site of the relation between intellectual consciousness and perceptual consciousness.

[10] Cf. V.I., 224-224, 229-230, 179, 232-233, where he discusses the problems of having introduced a tacit *cogito*.

> une manière d'exprimer et de noter un événement de l'ordre de l'être brut ou sauvage qui, ontologiquement, est premier (V.I., 253).

His realization of the inadequacy of the philosophical standpoint adopted earlier in his career may well serve to explain, at least in part, why after the publication of the Phénoménologie in 1945 there occurs a shift in the focus of his writings.[11] Indeed, in the period following the publication of this work language starts to become the central focus of Merleau-Ponty's thought, and for almost a decade following 1949 the quantity of his writings specifically on language increases dramatically.[12] This central focus upon language can be explained in the following terms: "[language] is no longer treated as just one example among many of the specifically human institution of meaning, but now becomes the privileged model of the whole of our experience of meaning " (Edie, 1976, 89).

This construal of the central importance of language introduces the explanation of the philosophical motive for the shift towards language, sketched in part by Merleau-Ponty himself in the following passage:

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[11] Merleau-Ponty's dissatisfaction with his earlier approach does not imply that he abandons his earlier approach entirely. A discussion of this point will be found in my discussion of Le Visible et l'invisible later in this chapter.

[12] Among his works of this period are the following titles: "La conscience et l'acquisition du langage," lectures given at the Université de Paris from 1949 to 1950, transcribed by his students, then approved by Merleau-Ponty himself, and subsequently published in the Bulletin du Groupe d'études de psychologie de l'Université de Paris (1949-50); "Sur la phénoménologie du langage," first published in 1951, now appearing in Signes; "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence," which appeared in 1952 in Les Temps Modernes and was later compiled in Signes; "Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression" (1952-53), "Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage" (1952-53) and "Le problème de la parole" (1953-54), all of which were courses given at the Collège de France and compiled in one single volume entitled Résumés de cours: Collège de France, 1952-1960; and, perhaps most significantly, though it was finally left incomplete, what was to have been Merleau-Ponty's major œuvre of this period, La Prose du monde, written for the most part between 1950 and 1952.

> justement parce que le problème du langage n'appartient pas, dans la tradition philosophique, à la philosophie première, Husserl l'approche plus librement que les problèmes de la perception ou de la connaissance. Il le pousse en position centrale, et le peu qu'il en dit est original et énigmatique. Ce problème permet donc mieux qu'un autre d'interroger la phénoménologie et non seulement de répeter Husserl, mais de recommencer son effort , de reprendre, plutôt que ses thèses, le mouvement de sa réflexion (S., 103).

What occurs at this time, then, is "an attempt to present phenomenology as a generalized theory of language" (Edie, 1976, 90). Unlike Wittgenstein, however, Merleau-Ponty is not so bold as to contend "that the study of language would solve all philosophical problems, but he did believe that linguistics would give us the paradigm model on the basis of which we would be able to elaborate a theory of the human sciences and thus establish a universal, philosophical anthropology" (Edie, 1976, 90).

One of the major works of this period, in which the foundations of this structure are put together, is La Prose du monde, written mainly between 1950 and 1952.[13] This work, along with the other works of this period, is important in the sense that it represents the crucial connection between the

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[13] In his "Avertissement" to this work that was finally published posthumously in 1969 as La Prose du monde, Claude Lefort argues that his own analysis of Merleau-Ponty's personal notes reveals that the work was undertaken either late in 1950 or early in 1951 (viii). Lefort further explains that in 1952 Merleau-Ponty allowed the work in progress to be interrupted; however, he is quite adamant that it was not at all a case of the work being abandoned (ix). Again from his close study of Merleau-Ponty's personal notes, Lefort finds evidence that Merleau-Ponty was still thinking about and even reworking the manuscript between 1954 and 1955 (x). He concludes, and only by way of hypothesis, since there is a lack of dated notes, that the work was finally let go by 1959. Lefort's analysis is highly significant in the sense that it draws our attention to how well La Prose du monde, as representative of the work of the middle period, can be understood as bridging the gap between the Phénoménologie and Le Visible et l'invisible; if Lefort concludes that Merleau-Ponty did not finally let go of the work until 1959, then this leads us right into the beginning of Le Visible et l'invisible.

Phénoménologie and Le Visible et l'invisible. I have already discussed the motive of the turn towards language, and shortly I shall explain why, finally, Merleau-Ponty's project cannot be disclosed in terms of language alone. His letting go of the work of the middle period, then, occurs only because his goals change; indeed, between the lines of La Prose du monde, as I shall demonstrate below, one can read the first signs of Merleau-Ponty's meditations on ontology that would later be published posthumously as Le Visible et l'invisible. The general relationship between these two works is explained well by Lefort in the following passage:

> la pensée du Visible et l'invisible germe dans la première ébauche de La Prose du monde, au travers des aventures qui, de modification en modification, trouvent leur aboutissement dans l'interruption du manuscrit -- de telle sorte que l'impossibilité de poursuivre l'ancien travail n'est pas la conséquence d'un nouveau choix, mais son ressort (1969, xii).

During this period, and specifically in La Prose du monde, one can point out numerous influences acting upon Merleau-Ponty. First, there is his indebtedness to the work of André Malraux in Les Voix du silence; and secondly, there is of course his discovery of Saussure's structuralism as outlined in his Course in General Linguistics, which represents perhaps the greatest influence upon him during this time. Much of La Prose du monde is an attempt to come to terms with and to rethink some of the basic principles established in these two important texts and to incorporate them into his own phenomenological philosophy. Grappling with Malraux, Merleau-Ponty seeks to incorporate some of the categories Malraux applies to painting into a

phenomenology of language.[14] His indebtedness to Saussure, on the other hand, causes him to consider anew the importance of the structural aspect of language, both in the manner in which it is adopted and employed by the speaking subject and in the development and history of language itself.

Yet these two thinkers were not the only influences upon Merleau-Ponty during this time; his work was also spurred on by Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre. Husserl's thought serves mainly as a foil for Merleau-Ponty's in La Prose du monde; much of what he objects to and attempts to establish is an alternative to Husserl's notion of a pure language.[15] Last of all there is the significant impression left upon Merleau-Ponty by Jean-Paul Sartre's Qu'est-

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[14] The influence of Malraux upon Merleau-Ponty in La Prose du monde and in "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence" is vast, and might itself be the topic of an entire chapter. But one of the most important aspects of this influence is Malraux's study of the development of perspective in painting (Silverman, 1980, 131). For Malraux, the technique of perspective involves a great deal more than a secret technique whose primary power is to represent an external reality that is both common to everyone and accessible to everyone in the same manner. As Merleau-Ponty writes: "[la perspective] est la réalisation même et l'invention d'un monde dominé, possédé de part en part, dans un système instantané, dont le regard spontané nous offre tout au plus l'ébauche, quand il essaie vainement de tenir ensemble toutes les choses dont chacune l'exige en entier" (P.M., 75). There are really two important elements present in this type of claim, one being the call for a revision of the 'objectivist' view of painting, where painting is thought merely to represent reality, the other being the essential importance of the painter's very act of perception, which functions not simply as a vehicle through which an external reality is transmitted to the painter, but an act in which the world actually comes to be for the painter. These two elements, then -- the importance of an anti-representationalist point of view and the understanding of the creative act as an act in which an experience of the world is realized -- represent some of the fundamental elements of Malraux's work that spur Merleau-Ponty's reflections upon language.

[15] The notion of a pure language as applied to Husserl is not the same as the one discussed generally in the first chapter of La Prose du monde, "Le fantôme d'un langage pur." This latter type of pure language I shall discuss below. When Merleau-Ponty critisizes Husserl's conception of a pure language, what is intended, rather, is the notion of a pure grammar formulated in Husserl's early work (v. Recherches logiques, II, 85-143), which would be universally applicable to all languages. As he explains: "la solution des doutes touchant le langage ne se trouve pas dans un recours à quelque langue universelle qui surplomberait l'histoire" (P.M., 37). And again, making the consequences of the early Husserlian standpoint clear: "une 'eidétique du langage', une 'grammaire pure' comme celle que Husserl esquissait au début de sa carrière -- ou bien une logique qui ne garde des significations que les propriétés de forme qui justifient leurs transmissions, ce sont deux manières, l'une 'platonicienne', l'autre nominaliste, de parler de langage sans paroles ou du moins de telle manière que la signification des signes qu'on emploie, reprise er redéfinie, n'excède jamais ce qu'on y a mis et qu'on sait y trouver" (P.M., 24).

ce que la littérature? So strong is the influence of this work upon him that he himself proclaimed, "il faut que je fasse une sorte de Qu'est que la littérature?" (quoted in Lefort, vii). Indeed, when in 1959 La Prose du monde was still incomplete and Merleau-Ponty revised a portion thereof for publication in Les Temps Modernes, he dedicated it to Jean-Paul Sartre.

Merleau-Ponty's response to Sartre's Qu'est que la littérature? determines one of his major aims in La Prose du monde:

> as we might expect, there are a number of fundamental points in Sartre's What is Literature? which are at odds with Merleau-Ponty's position. In fact, Sartre refers to the Phenomenology in his opening pages and explicitly rejects the notion that there is any parallelism between literature on the one hand, and the art of the painter, sculptor or musician on the other. Merleau-Ponty, for his part, evinced substantial disagreement with Sartre's book and intended to undertake a detailed study of literature in reply (Langer, 177).

Sartre's Qu'est que la littérature? therefore impels Merleau-Ponty to deal with the problems of expression and he adopts the notion of prose in its purely literary use (Lefort, vii). Silverman clarifies the issue in the following terms: "[Merleau-Ponty] hoped to provide an account of literary experience in which communication is a central feature, but which is not simply grounded in the communication of freedom by the prose writer" (1980, 132). Given Merleau-Ponty's conviction of the importance of communication, it is not surprising that he is interested in *both* sides of the literary experience: indeed, he keenly considers the experience of author and reader alike. One of the things Merleau-Ponty commits himself to is explaining the connection between writer and reader through language and lived experience: only because the

writer has experienced something pertinent to communicate and because he or she has come upon apt words to communicate this sentiment -- in short, only because the writer has succeeded in formulating something the reader finds engaging -- is the reader at all interested in reading the work in the first place. When Merleau-Ponty is explaining the questions that concern him the most surrounding the literary experience, he is careful to situate these topics in the space *between* writer and reader: the task is not first and foremost the writer's task, i.e., to find the correct words; nor is it primarily the work of the reader, i.e., to interpret them -- the task, says Merleau-Ponty somewhat curiously, belongs to language itself. As he explains: when presented with an experience which may seem banal but which nevertheless indicates to the writer a specific way of life,

> *la tâche du langage est* [...] [de] choisir, assembler, manier, tourmenter ces instruments [mots, formes, tournures, syntaxe, genres littéraires] de telle manière qu'ils induisent le même sentiment de la vie qui habite l'écrivain à chaque instant, mais déployé désormais dans un monde imaginaire et dans le corps transparent du langage (P.M., 67, emphasis added).

It is most curious that at least one eminent commentator of Merleau-Ponty understands this passage as indicating explicitly the *author's* task.[16] Yet Merleau-Ponty does not say this, and nor does he mean it. Obviously this is what our traditional understanding of language and the writing process teaches us that the author must do; the conscious rational side of the writer must choose and manipulate carefully his or her words to create a meaningful piece of writing entirely in line with what he or she initially envisaged.

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[16] V. Silverman (1980, 132-133).

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this traditional interpretation of language, which he says is found both in common sense and in the sciences (P.M., 9), functions as the first chapter of La Prose du monde, entitled "Le fantôme d'un langage pur." On this interpretation, language functions more as a tool suited perfectly to its task: "exprimer, ce n'est alors rien de plus que remplacer une perception ou une idée par un signal convenu qui l'annonce, l'évoque ou l'abrège" (P.M., 7). Operating as the means by which we replace a thought or perception, language sweeps us directly towards the objects it designates (P.M., 7). Yet it is this type of conclusion that Merleau-Ponty cannot accept. First of all, to construe language in terms such as this implies that the act of expression is defined essentially by its ability to designate this or that object. Consequently, the act of expression occurs absolutely clearly and directly because the author's or speaker's words always signify something, even if it is not the desired signification (P.M., 8). Secondly, when language is given the primary function of designating directly this or that, it is bereft of any power it may *itself* have over and above this power of direct reference. When these clarifications are made, it becomes evident that, understood in this fashion, communication occurs absolutely unobstructed by language -- thus language itself essentially disappears. As Merleau-Ponty concludes, quoting Jean Paulhan: "cette théorie du langage aurait pour conséquence 'que tout se passât à la fin [...] comme *s'il n'y avait pas eu langage*'" (P.M., 14).

This interpretation, which makes of language a transparent medium through which we see without difficulty what it is we mean, results in language being understood as something essentially pure -- and as the title of the chapter suggests, Merleau-Ponty argues that "pure language" is but a spectre. He affirms that in the process of communication language *does* have

powers of its own over and above those of direct designation, and that our very *experience* of communication demonstrates that language is *not* a clear, unobtrusive medium. Instead, he implies that communication, and thus language, possesses certain mysteries (P.M., 12-14); and determining precisely what these mysteries are is part of the book's central task.[17]

One of the main aspects of this mystery is the degree of power that language itself acquires in the process of communication. And this is clear in the above passage where Merleau-Ponty mentions "the task of language," thus usurping some of the control that the common sense interpretation allots to the author. In order to unravel this mystery, then, one must make sense of why Merleau-Ponty contends that this is language's task, and not merely that of the author.

To phrase the issue as Merleau-Ponty does is to grant language a central role in the creative process, a role greater than simply that of an "absolutely transparent" medium of expression (P.M., 156). Making language less passive and more active may sound like a peculiar thing to do, yet this is exactly the sense Merleau-Ponty intends: language is never subordinate to our demands as writers or speakers, and nor is it absolutely autonomous.[18] As he writes in "Sur la phénoménologie du langage": "exprimer, pour le sujet

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[17] Although at this point Merleau-Ponty does mention an inherent mystery involved in communication or language he does *not* intend a simple mystification of these phenomena. It may well be that Merleau-Ponty employs the term "mystery" here in juxtaposition to the perspicuously clear idea of language expressed in the common sense view. What he intends to show is that language itself possesses powers of its own; but having not yet done so, the mere suggestion of this intention, when found within a discussion of language understood as a pure medium, implies that language is being given mysterious powers.

[18] Consider the following passage from La Prose du monde: "le langage [...] n'est pas au service du sens et ne gouverne pas le sens; de l'un à l'autre il n'y a pas de subordination ni de distinction que seconde. Ici personne ne commande et personne n'obéit; en parlant ou en écrivant nous ne nous référons pas à quelque *chose à dire* qui soit devant nous, distincte de toute parole, ce que nous avons à dire n'est que l'excès de ce que nous vivons sur ce qui a été dit" (158-159). Cf. S., 104.

parlant, c'est prendre conscience; il n'exprime pas seulement pour les autres, il exprime pour savoir lui-même ce qu'il vise" (S., 113).[19] Thus does language play a fundamental role in our coming to know precisely what it is we want to say.

One of the main consequences of this interpretation of language is that it loses its quality of signifying objects directly or replacing thoughts or perceptions directly, qualities it held essentially in a more common sense or scientific perspective. Partially as a direct result of this, language's role in communication is no longer direct -- it is *indirect*: "tout langage est indirect ou allusif, et, si l'on veut, silence" (S., 54). This conclusion, that language is indirect or silence, is absolutely essential to an understanding of his phenomenology of language of this period, and determining precisely what Merleau-Ponty means by it will be the focus of the main chapters of the enquiry to follow. The conclusion owes a great deal to Merleau-Ponty's adoption of the basic principles of Saussure's structuralism. Following Saussure, Merleau-Ponty construes language as a closed system in which meaning is generated by the differences between terms rather than by the terms' own power of reference to external objects. When this construal of language is combined with the argument that language does not simply translate pre-formed thoughts, the resulting conception of language is one in which its power to signify directly becomes secondary and negligible (S., 56), thus opening up the possibility for it to signify indirectly.[20] Yet the claim also owes a great deal to a phenomenological study of the lived experience of

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19 Cf. S., 101 and 112, and P.M., 146.

20 V. the following passage from Signes: "si finalement [la langue] veut dire et dit quelque chose, ce n'est pas que chaque signe véhicule une signification qui lui appartiendrait, c'est qu'ils font tous ensemble allusion à une signification toujours en sursis, quand on les considère un à un, et vers laquelle je les dépasse sans qu'ils la contiennent jamais" (110).

language. In a phenomenological study it is noted how language is intrinsically bound to the primordial silence of the life-world as it attempts to give expression to a lived experience that is mute and ignorant of its own meaning (Lefort, 1964, 355).

As we shall see below, there are senses in which Merleau-Ponty actually contends, as he does here, that language *is* silence. However, he also maintains that language is intimately *bound to* silence, insisting that the manifestation in which language is closest to silence occurs during the process of creative composition, especially literary composition. This may not be at all surprising given the prominence of literature, following Sartre's influence, in the work of this period. Hence, in subsequent parts of this enquiry, following directly Merleau-Ponty's own strategy, I shall often privilege writing over speech, for it brings us closer to the primordial silence in question, as I have explained above in the "Introduction." But before continuing with this portion of the enquiry, I shall first outline how these considerations of language lead into Le Visible et l'invisible.

One of the most critical conclusions of Merleau-Ponty's thought during the middle period -- a conclusion that again stems both from his adoption of many Saussurian tenets and from his rejection of the traditional understanding of language as an instrument that merely refers to objects -- concerns a radical revision of our very conception of what language is. One of the main things his phenomenology of language of this period teaches us is "une nouvelle conception de l'être du langage, qui est maintenant logique dans la contingence, système orienté, et qui pourtant élabore toujours des hasards, reprise du fortuit dans une totalité qui a un sens, logique incarnée" (S., 110). The importance of this overall conclusion is that it introduces the development of a strong "ontological significance " ["portée ontologique"] (S.,

108). And the result of this ontological significance marks the beginning of the transition to a renewed understanding of being: "le langage ne relève ni de la conscience ni d'un monde naturel ou même de la conscience seulement perceptive, *mais d'un troisième genre d'être* qui est celui d'un esprit généralisé, d'un logos culturel ou d'une logique incarné" (Madison, 140, emphasis added). With the introduction of this "third kind of being" it is thus clear that Merleau-Ponty is proceeding towards a very different perspective, namely, that of the "phenomenological ontology" (Lingis, xl) of Le Visible et l'invisible.

Nowhere is this shift away from a central focus upon language towards a predominantly ontological enquiry expounded with greater clarity and brevity than in the closing passage of the text he submitted to support his candidacy at the *Collège de France*. Indeed, the passage may serve as the best general preface to Le Visible et l'invisible. Hence, I shall quote it *in extenso*:

> nos recherches doivent donc nous conduire finalment à réfléchir sur cet *homme transcendental*, ou cette 'lumière naturelle' commune à tous, qui transparaissent à travers le mouvement de l'histoire, -- sur ce Logos qui nous assigne pour tâche d'amener à la parole un monde muet jusque-là, -- comme enfin sur ce Logos du monde perçu que nos premières recherches rencontraient dans l'évidence de la chose. Nous rejoignons ici les questions classiques de la métaphysique, mais par un chemin qui leur ôte le caractère de *problèmes*, c'est-à-dire de difficultés qui pourraient être résolues à peu de frais, moyennant quelques entités métaphysiques construites à cet effet. Les notions de Nature et de Raison, par exemple, loin de les expliquer, rendraient incompréhensibles les métamorphoses auxquelles nous avons assisté depuis la perception jusqu'aux modes de l'échange humain, car, en les rapportant à des principes séparés, elles nous masquent le moment, dont nous avons la constante expérience, où une existence se retourne sur elle-même, se

> ressaisit et exprime son propre sens.[21] L'étude de la perception ne pouvait nous enseigner qu'une 'mauvaise ambiguïté', le mélange de la finitude et de l'universalité, de l'intériorité et de l'extériorité. Mais il y a, dans le phénomène de l'expression, une 'bonne ambiguïté', c'est-à-dire une spontanéité qui accomplit ce qui paraissait impossible, à considérer les élements séparés, qui réunit en un seul tissu la pluralité des monades, le passé et le présent, la nature et la culture. La constatation de cette merveille serait la métaphysique même, et donnerait en même temps le principe d'une morale (R.M.M., 408-409).[22]

The passage provides a lucid juxtaposition between the early formulation of his thought in the Phénoménologie, his reformulation of it to focus primarily on language and an indication of why even this topic will not suffice as he moves into the later period and Le Visible et l'invisible. We hear Merleau-Ponty himself admit that basing his research exclusively on the study of perception has not allowed him to go far enough: it has left matters seriously unclear, thus teaching a "bad ambiguity." However, a "good ambiguity" is to be found in expression; expression is a crucial manner of explaining precisely how it is possible that separate beings co-exist in mutual understanding, and not only in the here and now, but in and through a

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[21] The notion of a person turning to examine herself, regaining control over herself and finally finding and expressing meaning in her life, meaning she feels is wholly individual, this is not a new idea for Merleau-Ponty; actually, a similar turn of phrase first occurs in the Phénoménologie (229-230).

[22] It is interesting to note that in the period when Merleau-Ponty wrote this outline of his future philosophical project, his intense interest in the experience of the speaking subject and the meaning of communication led him to grapple with Husserl's "Fifth Meditation" (Silverman, 1980, 127). Indeed, in the last few lines he seems to be responding directly to Husserl, saying essentially, yes, it is possible to account for each person's subjectivity without my subjectivity reducing the other to the status of object, and vice versa. Yet it is in the essay "Sur la phénoménologie du langage" in Signes (116-117) that Merleau-Ponty discusses in detail this important response to Husserl's unresolved problem of inter-subjectvity.

coherent cultural history.[23] Nevertheless, the phenomenon of expression gives us access to something far greater than itself, a realm where the past and present, the plurality of monads and nature and culture are all gathered together into "one single fabric"; furthermore, the phenomenon of expression is linked with a "natural light common to all," a "Logos," our reflection upon which will bring us to expressing a hitherto mute world. These notions are harbingers of the "third kind of being" that develops out of the "ontological significance" of the phenomenology of language of his middle period. They are anticipations as clear as any to be found of the ontology of being he develops in his later work.[24] The shift towards this "phenomenological ontology" is thus necessary because this realm of being, first disclosed by language, cannot be further disclosed in terms of language alone. His prior attempt "to present phenomenology as a generalized theory of language" (Edie, 1976, 90) therefore becomes an attempt to present phenomenology primarily as ontology.

The final formulation of Merleau-Ponty's thought arises, then, during the last two years of his life, between 1959 and 1960. Some of this work is contained in L'Œil et l'esprit, some in the "Preface" to Signes, but most significant is the work appearing in Le Visible et l'invisible, a manuscript published posthumously containing the introductory first part of a new, essentially ontological treatise and accompanied by a selection of working notes. One could well say that Le Visible et l'invisible represents a new

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[23] Cf. R.M.M.: "la relation linguistique des hommes doit nous aider à comprendre un ordre plus général de relations symboliques et d'institutions, qui assurent, non plus seulement l'échange des pensées, mais celui des valeurs de toute espèce, la coexistence des hommes dans une culture et, au-delà de ses limites, dans une seule histoire" (407).

[24] In one working note Merleau-Ponty makes mention of "the common tissue of which we are made" and equivocates it with "wild Being" (V.I., 257); in numerous others he either mentions or discusses the importance of the notion of *logos* to the study (V.I., 219, 223-224).

beginning -- a new beginning that nevertheless emerges from all of his previous writings. In the "Postface" to the work, Claude Lefort writes:

> loin de constituer l'état définitif de sa philosophie, ses premiers ouvrages, justement célèbres, n'avaient fait que jeter les fondements de son entreprise, créer en lui la nécessité d'aller plus loin. Mais Le visible et l'invisible devait mettre en pleine lumière le chemin parcouru depuis le temps où la double critique de l'idéalisme et de l'empirisme lui faisait aborder un nouveau continent [....] l'intention devient manifeste de reprendre les analyses anciennes sur la chose, le corps, la relation du voyant et du visible pour dissiper leur ambiguïté, et pour montrer qu'elles n'acquièrent tout leur sens qu'en dehors d'une interprétation psychologique, rattachées à une nouvelle ontologie (347).

The scope of Le Visible et l'invisible broadens considerably from that of his earlier works, becoming, as the passage from Lefort indicates, an attempt to disclose a fundamentally new ontology.[25] It is this ontology that necessitates returning to the question of inter-subjectivity, to the question of Nature (V.I., 219) and even to the question of language (V.I., 239), so that answers to them can be worked out more satisfactorily in this new perspective. Yet the embarkation upon an exclusively ontological enquiry does not involve the overthrowing of any of his previous work. Rather, it necessitates turning towards the questions again and re-thinking the way in which they were originally posed. In La Phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty,

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[25] The broad scope of the work is testified to in following comment made by Merleau-Ponty concerning the work in progress that would be published posthumously as Le Visible et l'invisible: "la théorie de la vérité fait l'objet des deux livres auxquels nous travaillons maintenant" (R.M.M., 405). Indeed, the original title he proposed for the work was L'Origine de la Vérité.

Gary Madison argues that Le Visible et l'invisible "avait pour intention de reprendre, d'approfondir et de rectifier toute sa philosophie telle qu'il l'avait formulée auparavant" (17). One of the major aims of Le Visible et l'invisible is thus a re-thinking of the ontological relationship between subject, object and being. And so before examining the place of language within the work, it would be well to clarify, in broad terms, the basic tenets of this ontology and the consequences thereof.

The shift away from the understanding of being contained in the Phénoménologie is significant, yet one must be careful not to misunderstand this development in his thinking. As Madison explains: "si dans la Phénoménologie Merleau-Ponty définit en somme le monde comme le corrélatif des projets existentiaux-corporels du sujet, dans Le Visible et l'Invisible c'est le sujet qui est défini par rapport au monde dont il est la 'venue à soi'" (220). Madison is quick to point out, however, that what has happened is more than a simple reversal; in Le Visible et l'invisible the concept "Être" that plays such a fundamental role is not the same as the concept "être" appearing here and there in the Phénoménologie. What actually occurs, then, is that Merleau-Ponty delves deeper into this question and effects a radical revaluation of it.

In the Phénoménologie Merleau-Ponty does speak of "l'être," and presents it as a type of pre-world, an undifferentiated being, in some sense anterior to the world that is the correlative (or horizon) of human experience. He speaks here as if it were the ineffable presence of the subject before this vague "being" that gives rise to, or constitutes, the world of our experience. But in the Phénoménologie all of this is left unclear (Madison, 220).

In Le Visible et l'invisible, on the other hand, the notion of "l'Être" is subject to a radical re-examination. Merleau-Ponty rejects two manners of

accounting for being that would have been well-known to him: first of all, he disagrees with Sartre that it is to be found on the side of the object and, secondly, he disagrees with Husserl that it is to be found on the side of the subject. Instead, he argues that it is found in the space between, where object and subject meet. Therefore, neither the world nor the subject has ontological priority: this belongs instead to "l'Être," which is neither explicitly object nor explicitly subject, but is common to both (Madison, 220).

Merleau-Ponty's point of view precludes, too, another account of being, one that would have been well-known at this time, namely, that of Heidegger. But his attitude towards Heidegger's perspective is not absolutely clear. In one working note to Le Visible et l'invisible he explicitly invites comparison with Heidegger: "ce monde perceptif est au fond l'Être au sens de Heidegger qui est plus que toute peinture, que toute parole, que toute 'attitude', et qui, saisi par la philosophie dans son universalité, apparaît comme contenant tout ce qui sera jamais dit, et nous laissant pourtant à le créer" (223-224). In a later working note, however, he makes a statement that is more consonant with the position he outlines in the rest of the work by explicitly denying the crucial ontological difference -- i.e., "the difference between our relation to beings and our understanding of being" (Dreyfus, 107) -- that would make any comparison with Heidegger intelligible: "[il n'y a] pas de différence *absolue*, donc, entre la philosophie ou le transcendental et l'empirique (il vaut mieux dire: l'ontologique et l'ontique) -- Pas de philosophique absolument pure" (319).[26]

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[26] In denying that there is no absolute difference between philosophy and, for example, empirical studies, Merleau-Ponty denies the very possibility of *pure* philosophy. Nevertheless, he will not concede that philosophy then becomes non-philosophy, stating that such a discipline would consider reality only in its "visible" aspect, thus depriving it of its true depth (V.I., 266).

The overall result of Merleau-Ponty's new ontological perspective can best be understood in terms of a remark he made in the Phénoménologie, which I have discussed above, where he mentions that what he seeks to do is overcome the classical dichotomy between subject and object (Ph. P., 203). As we have seen, he later realizes that he was unsuccessful in his efforts to do so in the Phénoménologie. Part of the task of Le Visible et l'invisible consists in finally fulfilling this task. And as Madison remarks (219-220), the sense in which he succeeds in this task is most clearly understood as an overcoming of Husserl's ontology. In order to clarify the deepest sense in which an overcoming finally occurs, then, I shall thus give a brief account of Husserl's ontology.

For Husserl, being is always understood as being-for-the-subject; the being of the phenomenon thus consists in being an object for consciousness (Madison, 231). "Husserl's [phenomenological] idealism," writes Herbert Spiegelberg, "ties up being with the transcendentally reduced consciousness [....] for Husserl 'being' exists only for consciousness, and [...] actually 'being' is nothing apart from the meaning which it receives by bestowing acts of this consciousness" (I, 143). The *coup d'éclat* of the ontology developed in Le Visible et l'invisible is attributed to Merleau-Ponty's attempt to avoid Husserl's radical (or transcendental) subjectivization of being. The final outcome of this overcoming, then, is the effort to articulate an entirely new understanding of being: "l'Être n'est plus ce qui se définit par rapport au sujet (aux projets corporels), mais c'est la source unique du sujet aussi bien que de l'objet lui-même. L'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty repose sur une nouvelle conception de l'intentionnalité (du rapport sujet-objet)" (Madison, 218-219).

Merleau-Ponty's account of the ontological relationship of the subject to being can be clarified by a metaphor, a metaphor that is crucial to his

ontology. Just as when I touch my hands together I touch and am touched simultaneously, the flesh of my body is concomitantly subject and object; it is neither quite one nor quite the other, but two differentiations of one substance, namely, "flesh." It is not surprising, then, that one of the most significant, yet highly ambiguous notions of Merleau-Ponty's ontology becomes that of "flesh." Indeed, in the chapter entitled "L'Entrelacs -- le chiasme" he presents the notion of "flesh" as a prototype of being (V.I., 179).

Nevertheless, when Merleau-Ponty employs the term "flesh" he does not intend the physical matter of our bodies. As he explains:

> la chair dont nous parlons n'est pas la matière. Elle est l'enroulement du visible sur le corps voyant, du tangible sur le corps touchant, qui est attesté notamment quand le corps se voit, se touche en train de voir et de toucher les choses, de sorte que, simultanément, *comme* tangible il descend parmi elles, *comme* touchant il les domine toutes et tire de lui-même ce rapport, et même ce double rapport, par déhiscence ou fission de sa masse (V.I., 191-192).

Thus, the notion of "flesh" serves as an informative concept denoting an essential structure of the life-world, a structure essential both to the body and the sensible world in which it dwells. It is a concept formulated in order to clarify and understand this essential structure or relation observed by Merleau-Ponty as pervasive in the life-world: "la chair (celle du monde ou la mienne) n'est pas contingence, chaos, mais texture qui revient en soi et convient à soi-même" (V.I., 192). Indeed, the notion lies at the very heart of his ontology: "it is because the ontological structure is the same that he applies the notion of flesh to both things and the body; this ontological structure is the doubling up into inside and outside, surface and depth. It is what is

expressed in the notion of crossing or chiasm. To be flesh is to be the locus of a chiasm" (Sallis, 84).

In Le Visible et l'invisible, then, the phenomenon of language loses its central position, and the main focus becomes the development of this ontology. Yet his prior focus upon language is not lost entirely; language remains as an important topic of his ontological meditations. Since human beings are an integral part of the chiasm where being reveals itself, becoming visible, while at the same time concealing itself, remaining invisible, language is but one mode of our making present of being. Nevertheless, it is a truly crucial mode. For the philosopher, the attempt to comprehend being is essentially the attempt to articulate being; thus silence and language remain inextricably intertwined:

> le philosophe parle, mais c'est une faiblesse en lui, et une faiblesse inexplicable: il devrait se taire, coïncider en silence, et rejoindre dans l'Être une philosophie qui y est déjà faite. Tout se passe au contraire comme s'il voulait mettre en mots un certain silence en lui qu'il écoute. Son "œuvre" entière est cet effort absurde. Il écrivait pour dire son contact avec l'Être; il ne l'a pas dit, et ne saurait le dire, puisque c'est du silence. Ainsi, il recommence... (V.I., 166-167).

Essential, too, in the development of Le Visible et l'invisible are his ruminations on the silence of the speaking subject brought forth in detail in the middle period. As Edie explains:

> from 1959 onwards he attempted to incorporate these incipient reflections on a theory of "Speech and Silence" into the much broader framework of "The Visible and the Invisible." The background silence of *la langue*, and the context of discourse

> which enables authentic acts of new speaking to take place, is but *one* of the structures of what, in his final work, he called "the invisible" (1976, 104).

This crucial notion of the *structure* of language, one which Merleau-Ponty developed from the work of Saussure, but to which he gave his own distinctly phenomenological flavour, as we shall see in the following chapter, by binding it tightly to the experience of the speaking subject, is of fundamental importance, for in Le Visible et l'invisible Merleau-Ponty argues that the body, in its encounter with the world, is structured like language. The structures of perception are understood as "strict analogues" of the structures of language (Edie, 1976, 104). The task of philosophy, then, is to understand fully the significance of this relationship between perceptual and linguistic structure and thus to comprehend the substance of the chiasm we inhabit. Doubtless it is this task that Merleau-Ponty is alluding to when he refers to the "'natural light' common to all," a "Logos," our reflection upon which will give us the task of vocalizing a hitherto mute world.

Thus does the task of philosophy become enmeshed in the paradoxical intertwining of language and silence. The invisible world of Le Visible et l'invisible is "the life-world's being in concealment" (Lowry, 294), and an essential part of the philosopher's task is an enquiry into this silent realm -- and the enquiry, of course, involves language. As one critic writes, while quoting Merleau-Ponty:

> unlike literature, which transforms experience into its own fabric, philosophy seeks to conform itself to the fabric of experience and to the ontological texture. However, [...] philosophy does not seek to conform itself to 'positivity' but to silence. It seeks to express 'the things themselves from the depth

> of their silence,' to commute speech and silence into one another, to articulate what the world, in its silence, 'means to say' (V.I., 18; 61)" (Fóti, 273).

It is out of this fundamental silence of the life-world and of perceptual experience that language arises, though from which it never quite escapes, for the return to ontology heralded by Le Visible et l'invisible is a continuation of Merleau-Ponty's "search for the heart of the *Lebenswelt*" (Lowry, 294), a heart that remains inextricably bound to silence. On this matter Merleau-Ponty is particularly fond of the following passage from Husserl's Méditations Cartésiennes: "c'est l'expérience [...] muette encore qu'il s'agit d'amener à l'expression pure de son propre sens" (33).[27] Yet the search itself remains a paradox, for in the very process of the enquiry the silence of the life-world "is always already broken," thus remaining at one and the same time "a disclosure/concealment or presence/absence" (Vóti, 281).

However, it is not my purpose here to attempt to unveil this ambiguity; it is enough to have made it explicit. The broad outline I have presented of Merleau-Ponty's last major work is intended to serve solely as an indication of how his phenomenology of language develops into Le Visible et l'invisible and is then incorporated into the ontology he expounds therein. More precisely, it has been my purpose to clarify how the paradox of the articulation of a primordial silence has its genesis in the Phénoménologie de la perception, is then given explicit attention in the works of the middle period and how it leads afterwards to, and indeed comes to pervade, the ontological meditations of Le Visible et l'invisible. To be sure, one could continue this analysis in much greater detail; but this is not our task. Le

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[27] This passage is quoted in the "Avant-propos" to the Phénoménologie (x) and in Le Visible et l'invisible (171).

Visible et l'invisible remains, sadly, an uncompleted fragment, the pieces of a puzzle that were not put together by the author himself. Rather than concentrate on this puzzle, I have determined to examine the middle period, where the puzzle of the paradoxical intertwining of language and silence is pieced together better by Merleau-Ponty himself. I shall be content, at this stage, if I have explained to the reader precisely how, as Claude Lefort has merely stated (1969, xii), the underlying thought of Le Visible et l'invisible germinates in La Prose du monde and subsequently grows out of it. Indeed, we have found that, although language plays a lesser role than it does in the middle period, his thinking at this later stage relies upon the earlier formulation of his theory and the conclusions to which it led. Let us now turn to examine the themes at the very core of his work of this middle period.

✣ II ✣

## Silence and the Structure of Language

Having traced both the origin and importance of the themes of silence and language in the development of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, we can now return to examine these themes in greater detail in the work of his middle period, the time during which they dominate his thinking.

Perhaps the most evident initial manifestations of the theme of silence emerge from considerations of the structural aspects of language. Yet during this period, the notion of structure, so important to traditional phenomenology, takes on a different form. Rather than referring specifically to a quality of human experience, to the structures of perception for example, as is the case in traditional phenomenology, the notion of structure comes to imply the ordered configuration of a system, whether it be language, or gesturing, etc. This important change is due to the influence of the structuralist movement. Although Merleau-Ponty would have been aware of structuralism through the work of anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, the main source of the influence is Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics and Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure's enormously influential Course in General Linguistics (Edie, 1976, 83, 89; Silverman, 1980, 126, 130). Since the initial meanings of silence to be uncovered are a direct result of Merleau-Ponty's attempt to incorporate basic principles of Saussure's

structural linguistics into a phenomenological perspective, it will therefore be necessary to consider Saussure's theory in some detail in order to understand clearly these meanings.

Before considering Saussure's work, however, let us examine an aspect of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language that, as we shall find, is absolutely fundamental to his conception of silence. This aspect comprises the distinctions between *parole parlante* and *parole parlée*, or *langage parlant* and *langage parlé*[1] (Ph.P., 229ff.; P.M., 17ff.); a consideration of these respective terms as well as the distinctions between them will lead directly to Saussure.

*Langage parlé*, or spoken language, refers to that body of expressions or that type of language whose meanings are already generally accepted within a linguistic system or culture. Examples of these would range from simple words to more complex turns of phrases whose meanings are understood by everyone; in general, then, commonly used everyday words, phrases and expressions are instances of *langage parlé*. One group of expressions that serves as a particularly clear example of this type of language is commonly used metaphors whose meanings are not directly evident from the sense of the words themselves. One such expression, "I found myself between a rock and a hard place," does not signify that the speaker finds him or herself uncomfortably positioned on a stony beach; rather, everyone recognizes that the expression refers to any awkward situation from which extrication is difficult. In this capacity the expression, and therefore the subject who speaks or writes the words, is saying absolutely nothing new; it simply prolongs a generally accepted meaning, one that has already been "sedimented" into the linguistic system. Contemporary British novelist Jeannette Winterson in her

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[1] The English equivalents are "speaking speech" and "spoken speech," or "speaking language" and "spoken language" respectively.

most recent novel, Written on the Body, terms this type of language "the saggy armchair of clichés" (10). Winterson labels these expressions with an unprecedented exactitude; her metaphor expresses clearly two of the most essential aspects of this type of language: first of all, the sagginess of the armchair indicates that it is well worn, as are these expressions; and secondly, the metaphor indicates a certain comfort, for it is as easy to fall into a comfortable armchair as it is to use a common phrase rather than coin one of one's own. The distinctive feature of *langage parlé*, then, is "to consolidate, to formalize, and to regulate established meaning" (Silverman, 1991, 189).

On the other hand, *langage parlant*, or speaking language, is classified by those expressions that introduce or reveal new meanings. And this is precisely what Winterson's own expression accomplishes; it creates a new image and combines therein certain meanings that apply to the use of haggard turns of phrase. *Langage parlant* could apply to anything from a simple expression such as Winterson's to an entire novel or poem that succeeds in being original or creative, that "sings the world" anew. This type of language "is not bounded by the established, sedimented elements of an already constituted language" (Silverman, 1991, 188); rather, it draws from the stock of available and familiar significations and alters them in order to engender brand new meanings. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

> le langage parlant, c'est l'interpellation que le livre adresse au lecteur non prévenu, c'est cette opération par laquelle un certain arrangement des signes et des significations déja disponibles en vient à altérer, puis à transfigurer chacun d'eux et finalement à sécreter une signification neuve, à établir dans l'esprit du lecteur, comme un instrument désormais disponible, le langage de [l'auteur] (P.M., 20).

It must be noted, however, that these two aspects of language are part of a broader duality within language, namely, the juxtaposition between *la langue* and *la parole*. The notion of *la parole* encompasses essentially all instances of speaking or writing, whereas *la langue* refers to the institution of language as a whole, that is, all rules and all conventions which determine that a particular language exists and functions in a certain manner. For example, when I write or speak English my words are instances of this specific language and are thus my *parole*. They in turn are governed by the rules, conventions and conventional meanings of the English language, which represents *la langue*.

Saussure makes this relationship into a tripartite one by introducing another term, namely, *le langage*.[2] For Saussure, *le langage* refers to "all manifestations of human language ['*langage*']" (Saussure, 6), or, in other words, to language as a "general phenomenon" (Caws, 67). Thus, to extend the above example, my spoken English (my *parole*), governed by the rules of the English language (*la langue*), is but an instantiation of the general phenomenon of language (*le langage*), which is one way in which human beings communicate with one another. Merleau-Ponty is not as rigorous as Saussure in his general employment of these important terms, which is why, perhaps somewhat confusingly, he can equivocate *parole parlante*, for example, with *langage parlant*.

For the most part, however, spoken language and speaking language represent all instances of speaking or writing. Nevertheless, spoken language

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[2] It is the introduction of this third term that prohibits us from translating these three terms -- *le langage*, *la langue* and *la parole* -- into English. It would be infelicitous to translate these terms, for the English translations for the first two French words are exactly the same, namely, "language."

has a closer connection to the more nebulous notion of *la langue*, because the generally accepted body of meanings it relies upon are what constitute a particular lexicon. Speaking language, on the other hand, can be more closely affiliated with *la parole*, for it is in the act of creative speaking or writing that new meanings come to be. This situation is clarified by Merleau-Ponty as follows:

> la parole, en tant que distincte de la langue, est ce moment où l'intention significative encore muette et tout en acte s'avère capable de s'incorporer à la culture, la mienne et celle d'autrui, de me former et de le former en transformant le sens des instruments culturels (S., 115).[3]

We have thus come to the point where we have situated the place of spoken language -- the specific type of language that involves the genesis of meaning -- in relationship to other types of language. Since Merleau-Ponty borrows many of these ideas from Saussure, in order to explain the notion of silence it is necessary to examine the role of these notions in Saussure in order to formulate a clearer understanding of them.

Since Saussure's structural linguistics is of quite a different nature than any theory of language explained so far, I would first like to approach it in general terms, providing the reader with a brief overview of the structuralist framework into which it fits. In order to sketch this general framework, I shall draw from the work of Jean Piaget, who, in a short book entitled Le structuralisme, discusses three basic elements of any structuralist system. In my exposition of the basic principles of Saussure's structural linguistics that

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[3] The notion of a silent significative intention lying at the origin of the meaning-giving linguistic act, as we shall see in the next chapter, is fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of any linguistic act that introduces new meaning.

are most important to Merleau-Ponty, all three of these characteristics are manifest; moreover, all three are absolutely essential to grasping clearly the general significance of what Saussure accomplishes and its pertinence to the present discussion. I shall therefore begin with a general examination of these characteristics and then go on to show how they are evident in Saussure's thinking.

According to Piaget, there are three fundamental characteristics of any structuralist system: wholeness, transformation and self-regulation. First of all, a structure's completeness or wholeness does not merely imply a conglomeration of unrelated elements; rather, it implies a closed system of intimately related components. Most important to the structuralist, explains Piaget, is neither the elements themselves nor the totality itself, but instead the very relations between the elements, "the manner or the process of composition" (9).

The second characteristic Piaget discusses is a structure's openness to transformation. To explain the role of this characteristic, Piaget points out a special duality or bipolarity in the notion of the processes or laws binding the elements together. As a result of being part of a complete set, these processes or principles are themselves structured; however, it is also these very same principles that impart a recognizable, coherent form to the structure -- hence, they are also structure-forming (*structurant*). Just as the forces binding a molecule together are part of the molecule itself and thus part of its basic configuration, so too are these forces the cause of this configuration being thus and so -- at once they mold and are molded. It follows from this that a structure is not at all static but able to change, for just as the forces within a molecule rearrange themselves to form perhaps a brand new molecule, so too can a structure rearrange itself and still remain a valid, cohesive unity.

The third main characteristic of a structure, explains Piaget, is its unique quality of self-regulation. This entails a closing-off of the system upon itself, a trait Piaget calls a *fermature*. As a result, any transformation occurring within the totality of the set occurs in virtue not of external factors, but, rather, in virtue of elements or principles within it. For example, if we think of adding or subtracting two whole numbers, we know in advance that the result will always be another whole number. We have performed a change in the system but have nevertheless stayed within the number system; and the change has been brought about not by external factors, but by internal means, i.e., the axioms constituting the number system (Piaget, 14). As we shall see below, this characteristic gives rise to the most radical and most controversial elements of a structure, for it implies that a theory of meaning can be constructed without any mention whatsoever of an external world.

Although Piaget's sketch does not refer explicitly to Saussure, as I have stated above, these three characteristics are easily seen playing crucial roles at the very heart of Saussure's theory of language.

Turning now to Saussure, I shall explain his theory by referring to certain basic notions. In a notebook, he remarks that language is based on certain dualities: individual and mass; comparison and exchange; signifier and signified; *la langue* and *la parole*; synchrony and diachrony (Caws, 67). It is the latter three which I shall take to be the most significant to an understanding of the theory as a whole; once these basic notions have been clarified, we will have grasped the structuralist's theory of language and be able to pinpoint how it influences Merleau-Ponty's conception of silence.

Perhaps the most primordial duality in Saussure's theory is that of diachrony and synchrony. The diachronic aspect of language refers to its evolutionary or historical nature; by tracing the historical development of a

term, a traditional linguist would say, we arrive at a fuller understanding of its present meaning. The synchronic structure of language denotes its static nature, its present existence as a unified system. In order to use the term whose development we have traced, we must first grasp how the rules of the present system apply to the term.

Saussure recognizes both of these aspects of language and he admits that both are important. Yet his account of language is revolutionary in that he argues that we cannot properly understand our present language by studying it diachronically, as was the fashion of the day (Saussure, 81-83; Jameson, 5-8), and so we must first separate synchronic linguistics from diachronic linguistics. Furthermore, he affirms the primacy of the synchronic aspect of language; we may continue to study language from an historical point of view, he contends, but the conclusions at which we arrive will be nothing more than matters of secondary importance -- they will be non-essential to an understanding of a present system of language. As Caws explains: Saussure "[exemplifies] the structuralist conviction that there is not much point in offering historical explanations until the nature of the object whose history is to be studied has been understood, since at best they displace the object to an earlier time" (64). To speak in terms philosophical, Saussure argues for the ontological primacy of the synchronic over the diachronic.[4]

From this conclusion follow two important corollaries. First of all, since the synchronic system is primary, language exists fully in its synchronic state. At every moment language constitutes a complete system. Although we do not dismiss its historical aspect, it can only be meaningfully studied as a system in the present. As Saussure himself explains:

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[4] Cf. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this distinction in Signes, 107-110.

> the first thing which strikes one while studying the facts of language is that their succession in time does not exist for the speaker: he is confronted with a state. And the linguist who wishes to understand this state must discard everything which produced it and ignore diachrony. He can only enter a speaker's mind by suppressing the past. The intervention of history will only falsify his judgements (81).

The second corollary which follows from this conclusion concerns the very constitution of language itself. If indeed language is treated as a synchronic system entirely complete in itself at every moment, it would follow that its historical aspect will be something external to it. Hence, it is only the internal aspects of language that will be of any essential importance to the linguist or the philosopher; all external aspects will be superfluous to the study. The famous analogy used to illustrate this point is that made between language and chess (22-23). While a game of chess is underway, explains Saussure, it is easy to see that all external factors, such as the history of the game's development, can be separated off without any effect whatsoever on the present game in progress. And so with language; it may well be that the Greek word *aletheia* has a far richer connotation than the English word "truth," but the essential meaning of our word "truth" is determined within the structure of our present linguistic system. Therefore, the internal aspects of language become its essence, while the external characteristics become merely accidental properties.

After having distinguished between the synchronic and the diachronic aspects of language, Saussure introduces a second feature, the tripartite relation discussed above between *le langage*, *la langue* and *la parole*. Since this

tripartite relationship, and especially the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, is essential to the basic internal constitution of the synchronic system, it would be well to consider another duality, which renders more explicit an account of how any particular language (*langue*) is constituted and subsequently put into use. This third basic duality is Saussure's famous, and extremely influential theory of the sign.

It is interesting to note that the sign, the basic linguistic unit, is itself, like language, constituted by a duality, namely, concept and sound-image ["image acoustique"], or signified and signifier respectively. The concept is the mental image of the object, the image evoked of a tree or of an ice-cream cone for example. From a traditional point of view, the concept remains an abstraction, for Saussure says nothing of its being measured against an external, real object. But this does not concern him; he argues that it is possible to give a consistent account of language without such reference. The very utterance of the sound-image is what signifies the concept. It is not merely a substitution for the written word, since Saussure argues for the primacy of spoken language. Hence, any accurate account of language must treat of this aspect first. The sign, then, is a complete entity in and of itself, and both of its parts are necessary for its existence *as* a sign: "the two elements are intimately united and each one recalls the other" (66). It is precisely this conjoining which indicates that the meaning of the sign will not be found by reference to something not directly related at least to other signs, and which indicates to what extent the sign, and thus language, remains at a mental level: "the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image [....] The linguistic sign therefore unites a two-sided psychological entity" (66).

There is one basic principle that relates to the constitution of the linguistic sign, namely, that the relation between the concept and the sound-image is arbitrary (67-70). Hence, the linguistic sign itself is arbitrary. By arbitrary Saussure does not mean that the speaker is free to choose just any sound-image and apply it to any concept; rather, he means that the connection is "unmotivated," that the signifier "actually has no natural connection" with the signified (69). There is thus no rational principle or law that enables one to explain why the sound-image "car" evokes a mental representation of a metal object of a vehicular nature with four wheels and an engine. The relationship simply exists as such without a ground.

The main significance of Saussure's construal of the arbitrary nature of the sign *as a principle* is that it negates *all* external considerations about the meaning or use not only of specific linguistic expressions, but also of language as a whole. Given this stringent, systematic account of language, a set constituted by the sign, how then does meaning arise within the system? Indeed, how does one learn to use this system?

If language is to be thought of as a system of signs, each distinct from the other, and, furthermore, if all external factors are superfluous in the determination of this system, it follows that, as a synchronic system, "*in language* ['*langue*'] *there are only differences*" (Saussure, 120). And this notion is asserted in the strongest sense: "whether one takes the signified or the signifier, language ['*langue*'] comprises neither ideas nor sounds which existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences which have issued from the system" (120). This is perhaps the most radical element of Saussure's theory, for from this contention it follows that the linguistic unit is meaningless in itself; it gathers meaning only from being juxtaposed against the other elements in the system: indeed, the ontological

status of any linguistic sign is determined by the relations it has to the other elements in the system. As Saussure explains:

> the idea or phonic substance contained within a sign is less important than what surrounds it in the other signs [....] A linguistic system is a combination of a series of differences of sound and a series of differences of ideas [....] In language ["*langue*"], as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others is precisely what constitutes it (120-121).

It is thus due to this configuration of differences that language comes to have meaning; the differences, and only the differences between the signs, cause meaning to be generated. This notion may even be understood as structuralism's most genial move: "what is striking about language," writes Peter Caws, "(and this is one of the fundamental insights of structuralism) is that the arbitrary association of two contingent systems of *difference* is capable of producing a system of *significance*" (73).

Let us consider an example. In pronouncing the words "mouse" and "house" Saussure would say that what enables our interlocutor to differentiate between the terms is not the fact that one refers to an inanimate object of bricks and mortar, while the other denotes a small, furry, sentient being. Saussure would contend that the sound-images do evoke such mental pictures, i.e., the signifieds, but that the origins of these pictures do not enter into the explanation; the truly original aspect that allows us to differentiate between the one and the other, he would argue, occurs at the phonic level, namely, at the level of the basic difference in the pronunciation of the first syllables /m/ and /h/.

It should now be sufficiently clear how Saussure's theory of language clearly exemplifies all of the characteristics outlined by Piaget. Language is argued to be a whole system unto itself, constituted exclusively and exhaustively by intimately related elements, signs, which are the basic linguistic units. As an hermetically sealed system, language is still capable of transformation; the key lies simply in understanding it *as* a system *while* it is a system in flux. Although this may at first appear peculiar, the scenario can be clarified if one thinks in terms of an organic whole. An analogy could be made to an ecosystem, which is most readily illustrated and, moreover, defined in terms not only of inter-dependent elements, but of the relations that obtain between these elements. Doubtless this analogy is flawed because, even though changes within the ecosystem are explained by the nature of the elements and, perhaps more importantly, how they effect one another, i.e., the relations between them, the ecosystem is greatly affected by unpredictable external factors, such as meteors or logging trucks, etc. Language, on the other hand, understood as an organic whole, is, by definition, immune to any external influences. Finally, as was alluded to immediately above, not only is the ordered structure capable of change, it is the cause of its own changes -- language is essentially self-regulating. Not only does Saussure understand language as an holistic structure, he also understands it as an organic one. And any study must concern the structure and the structure alone.

These initial and essential clarifications of the different aspects of Saussure's theory of language have led us into Merleau-Ponty's considerations of the role of silence in expression. Some of the key aspects are Saussure's considerations of *la langue* and *la parole*. Edie states the situation clearly: "the first meaning of the 'silence' which makes speech possible is that of *la langue*, which itself does not speak, but which is the *ground* of all speech;

this 'silence' is not unstructured; it is highly determinate" (1976, 103). Similar to the foundation of a building, *la langue* represents the ordered set of structures that makes possible our use of the general institution of language (i.e., *le langage*) through each individual's speaking and writing (i.e., through *la parole*), activities that constitute the synchronic system. Thus, our individual linguistic acts of speaking or writing come to be intelligible against a background we scarcely notice, and this structured and structuring framework is also a kind of language, a silent language. Moreover, it is ever-present in our speech-acts, especially those acts of speech that are simply cases of spoken language (*langage parlé*), for they do not surpass an already accepted body of meanings.[5]

Yet there is a second sense of silence, closely related to the one already mentioned. And in order to understand this sense we must again invoke Saussure. When Merleau-Ponty revised the third chapter of La Prose du monde, "Le langage indirect," and published it as "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence" in Les Temps Modernes, at the beginning of the revised essay he immediately acknowledges his debt to Saussure by proposing one of Saussure's most basic tenets:

> ce que nous avons appris dans Saussure, c'est que les signes un à un ne signifient rien, que chaqu'un d'eux exprime moins un sens qu'il ne marque un écart de sens entre lui-même et les

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[5] It should be noted that this silent language is more relevant to *langage parlé* than it is to *langage parlant*. In the case of spoken language no new meanings are introduced -- everything about its expressions is commonplace. On the other hand, although speaking language may very well institute new meanings in a conventional manner, in which case this type of silence will be a factor, it may also perform a contortion of certain basic elements of *la langue* in order to wring out new meanings. For this latter, more radical technique, in which this type of silence is less prevalent, one has only to think of the writing of an author such as James Joyce, who is apt to transgressing accepted rules and conventions, thus writing a new form of language.

> autres. Comme on peut en dire autant de ceux-ci, la langue est faite de différences sans termes, ou plus exactement les termes en elle ne sont engendrés que par les différences qui apparaissent entre eux (S., 49).[6]

As has been explained above, this precept is fundamental to Saussure's structuralist system; it allows language to be understood as a closed structure and it permits the generation of meaning to be explained by referring only to the terms within the system itself, and nothing external. Similar to Saussure, who likened language to a game of chess, Merleau-Ponty likens the linguistic system to a game of charades: "comme la charade, [le langage] ne se comprend que par l'interaction des signes, dont chacun pris à part est équivoque ou banal, et dont la réunion seule fait sens" (S., 53).

There are two significant outcomes of Merleau-Ponty's adoption of this Saussurian thesis. First of all, it entails the rejection of a more traditional and commonplace understanding of language as an instrument or tool at our disposal for the purpose of reference to an object, whatever that object may be. Following Merleau-Ponty's account, language is no longer primarily concerned with reference but rather with "sense" or "meaning." The "sense" of language is constituted by a system of signs and, more specifically, is the result of the interplay between the signs of the system. As he explains: "la valeur linguistique de ce mot n'est définie que par la présence ou l'absence d'autres mots à coté de lui" (P.M., 46).[7] Concerning the subsequent change in our conception of language as a tool or instrument, Merleau-Ponty is quite direct: "tout langage dans sa phase d'établissement [....] ne choisit pas seulement un signe pour une signification déjà définie, comme on va chercher

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[6] Cf. P.M., 59. Cf. also Saussure, 120-121, as quoted above.
[7] Cf. P.M., 44-47, 52; and S., 53.

un marteau pour enfoncer un clou ou une tenaille pour l'arracher" (P.M., 64). On this account, the more commonplace notion of reference becomes a "secondary power," and language itself, as a structured system, gains a certain degree of autonomy: "le langage est de soi oblique et autonome, et, s'il lui arrive de signifier directement une pensée ou une chose, ce n'est là qu'un pouvoir second, dérivé de sa vie intérieure" (S., 56).

There is a second outcome of the adoption of the Saussurian thesis concerning the central role of the differences between linguistic signs, namely, the loss of the notion of thought as an originally formulated text that written or spoken language merely translates (S., 53-54).[8] Merleau-Ponty's argument runs as follows: language is a closed and highly structured system; the system is made up of terms the differences between which allow us to account not only for the signification of each single term, but also for the signification of strings of terms together; furthermore, since this system is in play as soon as one speaks or writes, it thus cannot be the case that there is anything prior to the system of which the terms therein are merely a direct translation. In other words, there can be no distinction between language and thought.[9] This thesis is indeed a radical one, and it is clear that Merleau-Ponty argues that there really is no thought where there is no outward expression. Perhaps the radical nature of the thesis is due to his attempt to shake off once and for all the firmly entrenched traditional notion that our language is simply our attempt to put words in the place of pre-formed thoughts. What Merleau-Ponty effectively concludes, then, is that our thought is actually *incorporated*

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[8] In the Phénoménologie (211-214) he provides a different argument to support this conclusion. This subsequent reformulation of the argument is further proof of the enormous influence exerted upon his thinking by Saussure.

[9] A similar thesis is presented in the Phénoménologie. There he states the matter in the following terms: "la parole et la pensée [...] en réalité [...] sont enveloppées l'une dans l'autre" (211-212).

*within* our written or spoken words: "notre pensée *traine* dans le langage" (S., 54, emphasis added).[10] And it is a short step from this conclusion to the general conclusion that concerns us here: "si nous chassons de notre esprit l'idée d'un *texte original* dont notre langage serait la traduction ou la version chiffrée, nous verrons que l'idée d'une expression *complète* fait non-sens, que tout langage est indirect ou allusif, est, si l'on veut, silence" (S., 54).

This conclusion actually contains two different claims: in the first case, that language is indirect; and in the second case, that language is silence. Although these claims are absolutely essential to his thinking, especially during this period, neither of them nor the connection between them is fully explained. First of all, then, let us examine the issue of the indirectness of language. What exactly does Merleau-Ponty mean when he concludes that language is indirect or allusive? The conclusion appears at the end of a passage in which he argues that thought is not an "original text" to be merely translated into our written or spoken words. As I have explained above, this conclusion was made possible by his adoption of Saussure's thesis concerning the importance of the differences existing between linguistic signs. Now let us remember that the adoption of this thesis had another ramification as well as the revision of the notion of thought, namely, the loss of the importance of language's character of reference, which resulted in its gaining a certain degree of autonomy. Only by putting all of these claims together can we formulate a proper sense of what it is for language to be indirect or allusive.

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[10] It is important to note again, as I have mentioned above, that Merleau-Ponty's use of terms such as *langage* does not always mirror the exact sense in which they are employed by Saussure. If this were the case, it would be difficult to find any sense in this quotation, since it would be entirely bewildering to contend that thought "crawls along" ["traine"] in language, where "language" is understood as a "the general concept of language." Rather, what Merleau-Ponty intends is that our thought crawls along in our individual acts of language use, i.e., in our *parole*.

Most important to understanding what Merleau-Ponty means by indirectness or allusiveness is the recognition that the primary function of words or signs is no longer to refer *directly* to pre-formed thoughts, to concepts or to external objects. In a more traditional understanding of language, words directly indicate thoughts, concepts or things, and this direct relationship between word and object provides the very meaning of the words. Therefore, the formation of meaning in language could be thought of as the direct process of attaching words to what had already been formulated in thought or to what was perceived in the world. In Merleau-Ponty's case, however, the central role of this direct relationship is removed, and, following Saussure, the connection between signifier and signified becomes arbitrary. Moreover, with the actual linguistic value of a word now defined solely in terms of the presence or absence of other words beside it (P.M., 46), linguistic meaning therefore arises primarily out of the relations *between* words. Consequently, since the genesis of sense is no longer attributed to the word itself (i.e., to what is said directly) but rather to the space between words (i.e., to what is not actually said), linguistic signification arises more from what is *not* said than from what is said (S., 56). Thus can the claim be made that language functions indirectly rather than directly and that language is therefore allusive. All of these conditions are summed up well in the following passage:

> dire qu'aucun signe isolé ne signifie, et que le langage renvoie toujours au langage, puisque à chaque moment seuls quelques signes sont reçus, c'est aussi dire que le langage exprime autant par ce qui est entre les mots que par les mots eux-mêmes, et par ce qu'il ne dit pas que par ce qu'il dit (P.M., 61-62).[11]

[11] Cf. S., 56-57.

Although these considerations clarify how language is understood to be indirect or allusive, it is still perplexing that Merleau-Ponty concludes from this that language is *silence*. How indeed can he justify equating indirectness with silence? Although at first the relation may appear to be baffling, it stems directly from one of the points discussed above. If the genesis of linguistic meaning is attributed more to the spaces between words than it is to words themselves, then language's power of expression lies less in what is actually said and more in what is *not* said. Therefore, language itself is silence.

Both of the initial meanings of silence we have found are therefore directly related to the influence of Saussure. First of all, the accepted structure of language -- its principles, rules and conventions -- that makes possible all spoken or written language forms a silent, yet dominant background against which our writing and speaking take shape. Secondly, if one accepts that the linguistic system is a closed structure made up of terms defined by their differences, then one can accept that essential to the meaning of any enunciation are those unspoken, yet implicitly understood differences *between* the terms employed. Consequently, linguistic meaning arises in these silent gaps between words, and language thus speaks silently.

These configurations of the meaning of silence arise from a focus upon the technical structure of language; once one accepts the basic structuralist principles, the configurations themselves are not difficult to understand. Indeed, even Edie offers little more than a page to explain the one issue he introduces (1976, 103). Yet the matter is not so simple. Although these considerations of silence are unquestionably important and, furthermore, although we have seen that Merleau-Ponty endorses Saussure's precepts, he nevertheless diverges significantly from the path of Saussure's thinking.

Indeed, it is his phenomenological background that prevents him from becoming a true structuralist, for Merleau-Ponty still concentrates upon human experience, and most specifically the experience of communication. Indeed, the whole question of the *experience* of silence still lies before us. And it is this very dimension of the question that creates the divergence between a phenomenological perspective and the structuralist approach adopted from Saussure. For example, one notes that at the opening of "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence," although Merleau-Ponty immediately acknowledges a debt to Saussure, what he goes on to discuss is a major objection to Saussure's structural linguistics. The conundrum is as follows: if language is a closed system all of whose terms are defined by one another, then how do we account for the actual *acquisition* of language? It would seem that to view language in such an hermetically sealed manner would be to imply that we must first know a language in order to learn it (S., 59).[12]

The very manner in which Merleau-Ponty meets this objection reveals how firmly entrenched he remains within his phenomenological perspective. He argues, in essence, that language merely carries on "the principle of communication" that was already present and firmly established in our pre-verbal comportment: "parler, c'est à chaque moment détailler une communication dont le principe est déjà posé" (P.M., 59). The justification of this principle of communication has two significant elements: first of all, Merleau-Ponty contends that the principle is inferred from the fact that one human being perceives another human being in the world; secondly, since we share a world with our fellow human beings, our actions and behaviour necessarily involve and engage one another because we have common ends

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[12] Cf. P.M., 59-61.

(P.M., 60). The common thread running through each of these points is the fundamental importance of our embodied inter-subjective existence. He writes: "la première parole [...] émergeait des conduites qui étaient déjà communes et prenait racine dans un monde sensible qui déjà avait cessé d'être monde privé" (P.M., 60). Therefore, human beings had significant manners of communicating with one another before they employed a structured verbal language; and when this elaborate form of language finally came on the scene, it was a manifestation of this principle of communication. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to admit not only that these more "primitive" kinds of interaction are themselves a form of language, but also that there is a form of language present in our pre-verbal experience of the world, a from he calls "*expression primordiale*" (P.M., 110).[13] And as if this were not radical enough to a structuralist, Merleau-Ponty further argues that the genesis of language involved such a decisive change in our manner of communicating with one another that it caused a concomitant transformation

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[13] It is interesting to note that in responding to the question of how *children* acquire language there is a considerable difference between the brief discussion of this matter found in La Prose du monde (59-60) and the more detailed one presented in "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence"(S., 49-51). In this latter text his response focuses significantly more on the intricacies of the Saussurian system of the sign than on the notion of a pre-established non-verbal principle of communication. It may well be that he bases his explanation within a Saussurian context since the problematic issue results because of certain basic Saussurian principles. The problem is that if the elements of language only come to have meaning in opposition to each other, it would seem that the language learner would first have to know the whole language in order to learn it (S., 50). The answer he provides is as follows: "la langue s'apprend et, en ce sens, on est bien obligé d'aller des partis au tout. Le tout qui est premier dans Saussure, ce ne peut être le tout explicite et articulé de la langue complète, tel que l'enregistrent les grammaires et les dictionnaires. Il n'a pas davantage en vue une totalité logique comme celle d'un système philosophique dont tous les éléments peuvent (en principe) être déduits d'une seule idée [....] L'unité dont il parle est unité de coexistence, comme celle des éléments d'une voûte qui s'épaulent l'un l'autre [....] On sait depuis longtemps que le mot, chez l'enfant, fonctionne d'abord comme phrase, et même peut-être certains phonèmes comme mots [....] L'important est que les phonèmes sont d'emblée des variations d'un unique appareil de parole et qu'avec eux l'enfant semble avoir 'attrapé' le principe d'une différenciation mutuelle des signes et acquis du même coup *le sens du signe*" (S., 49-50).

of human being itself: language has inaugurated a whole new world, he says, and is responsible for a copernican revolution in our lives (P.M., 60).

These references to perception, to shared behaviour, and to the sensible world, not to mention this hint at an ontological thesis concerning the nature of human being, indicate his continued commitment to the phenomenological perspective. Equally important is the method in which he analyses the issues; his consideration of the issue by taking it back to its primary origins is a decisively phenomenological tactic.[14] Therefore, not only would his reliance upon perceptual experience and the notion of shared behaviour be abhorrent to a structuralist, but the very manner in which he proceeds with his consideration of the question would appear to demonstrate that the structuralist point of view had not penetrated the heart of his philosophical perspective. Consequently, although at this period in the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought there is a distinct tension between the basic principles of structuralism and the rudiments of his phenomenology, and although it is the influence of Saussure's structuralism that underlies these important conclusions concerning silence, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless remains firmly committed to a fundamentally phenomenological perspective. And it is to this fundamentally phenomenological perspective that I shall now turn.

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[14] V. John Sallis' discussion of this decisively phenomenological trait (esp. 21-23).

## ✣ III ✣

### Silence, Language and Lived Experience: the Origin of Expression

There will be as many methods of writing as there are authors who apply themselves to the task. Apparently Rousseau could not compose with pen in hand, whereas Chateaubriand could not compose without one. Rimbaud gave up writing entirely by his nineteenth year, but Simone de Beauvoir did not even begin to write seriously until after she had turned twenty; and Nietzsche continued to write even when he was close to death, and mad. Simone de Beauvoir further confesses to having endured periods when she felt that her ability to write had dried up, a state she admits that was not unusual for her; as for Robertson Davies, however, he confesses to being always on the job. And then there is Shakespeare, who, it is said, composed each line flawlessly as he went along; and Balzac, who could churn out sixty thousand words in ten days; and Sir Walter Scott, who not only sent first drafts to the printers but first drafts that were unread. On the other hand, writers such as Montaigne and F. Scott Fitzgerald would actually continue polishing works that had already been published. In a similar spirit, and in a characteristically witty fashion, Oscar Wilde has told of how he could spend "the morning putting in a comma, and the afternoon taking it out again." Even

Flaubert could apparently toil for three days "to grind out eight lines -- 'qu'il faut pourtant raturer encore'" (Lucas, 60).[1]

Yet as multifarious as the manners of literary composition may be, they all have one thing in common: when an author begins to compose, to piece together words, phrases and images to create something wholly new, then the author is drawing from what is commonly known as inspiration. Nevertheless, the sudden illuminations of inspiration have been attributed to various origins: a Hebrew poet assigned them to the spirit of the Lord, whereas the Greeks attributed them to the arrival of Muses. The topic was also prevalent amongst many writers of the Romantic period. William Blake proclaimed that he wrote from "'Inspiration and Vision,'" explaining that his long, prophetic poem "Milton" was actually "given to him by an agency not himself and 'produced without Labour or Study.'" P. B. Shelley insisted that the finest passages of poetry were not produced by labour and study but were instead the results of unconscious creativity. William Hazlitt echoes a similar opinion: "'the definition of genius,'" he explains, "'is that it acts unconsciously'" (quoted in Abrams, II, 7). The young French poet Arthur Rimbaud was similarly convinced that the source of his creativity was not part of his rational, conscious mind. Rimbaud is perhaps more akin to Blake in his conviction that this source lay outside himself. His famous cryptic affirmation "Je est un autre" refers to the strong feeling he had when he wrote that the source of his words was not his own mind but some external elusive other.

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[1] Some of the documentation pertaining to this paragraph is general knowledge; the rest can be found in the following sources: a collection of Simone de Beauvoir's writing entitled Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir (439-457); Robertson Davies' essay "The Conscience of the Writer" published in One Half of Robertson Davies (131-132); and George Lucas' book Style (260-264).

If notions such as "inspiration" and "Muse" have for a long time formed the cornerstone of our understanding of the essence of the creative use of language, we would not be wrong to ask precisely what it is they teach us about this process.

Doubtless there is to be found in all of these terms a strong hint of the mysterious, of the elusive. For example, a source rooted in the unconscious would certainly elude our rational mind, just as a Muse would remain distant, beyond the scope of our ken. This element of mystery is no stranger to the experience of some writers. Both Samuel Johnson and John Milton relate how they would awake in the night with lines and phrases already formed in their heads. Johnson refers to such instances as "the lucky moments of animated imagination [...] felicities which cannot be produced at will by wit and labour, but must arise unexpectedly in some hour propitious to poetry" (quoted in Lucas, 261).

However, the elusiveness of the source of one's inspiration might not be interpreted as negative, for another connotation of these notions is that of the cherished, of the desirable. How lucky indeed to have a gift conferred upon you by the gracious hands of a Muse, or to have the spirit of the Lord run through you! I suggest, then, that the meanings of these terms could be summed up by saying that they implicitly construe the creative process as something cherished as well as mysterious and elusive.

Nevertheless, it is highly probable that to continue to base the enquiry solely in notions such as these would prove prohibitive in formulating a clearer understanding of the creative nature of language. For such notions as the "felicities of imagination," "inspiration" and "the unconscious" are, it must now be admitted, nothing but seductive to the enquiring mind: they give clues and general indications, but ultimately they simply spur more

demanding questions. Indeed, these traditional conceptions fail to render the issue perspicuous, abandoning it shrouded in mystery. Therefore, since the source itself still remains alusive, further questions must be asked in order to approach it more closely.

This mystery is partially unveiled in the work of the Romantics themselves. The manuscripts of the Romantic poets along with the testimony of their contemporaries demonstrates that these writers "worked and reworked their texts no less arduously -- if perhaps more immediately under the impetus of first conception -- than the poets of earlier ages" (Abrams, II, 7-8). Indeed, it is Coleridge who honestly admits that the act of creation is as dependent upon sheer hard work as it is upon a mysterious inspiration or an elusive presence: "Coleridge, who believed that truth lies in the union of opposites, came closer to the facts of Romantic practice when he claimed that the act of composing poetry involves the psychological contraries 'of passion and will, of *spontaneous* impulse and of *voluntary* purpose'" (Abrams, II, 8).

The disciplined industriousness implied by the notion of voluntary purpose does not respond fully to our general query, for, as Coleridge implies, there remains the question of the *intertwining* of immediate inspiration with conscious volition. In other words, writing creatively (one could even say being creative in any manner) is a process consisting of an interplay between creative intuition and hard work.

But precisely what sort of an interplay is involved here? What exactly is the significance of the intertwining of inspiration with conscious volition? The relationship between the two is such an intimate one and so important that, in the first case, although there is an inspiration that moves the author to work, it is the author's work itself that actually appropriates and gives expression to whatever inspiration is granted. This means, first, that the

inspiration only comes to be meaningful and real as it is worked out in the act of writing and, secondly, that the act of writing only comes to be meaningful and real as it appropriates intuition.

Recalling some of the examples given above, the reader may well ask if testimonies such as those of Johnson and Milton, who claim to have found certain passages of their writing perfectly pre-formed in their heads, do not serve as counter-examples to this contention concerning the importance of the intertwining of intuition and conscious volition. On the contrary, they provide support to the thesis, for if Johnson and Milton had not decided to sit down and actually write the passages out, the content of the intuition would have evaporated into oblivion.

To understand writing, then, to comprehend precisely how language functions in its most creative mode -- that is, to understand what Merleau-Ponty calls "le langage dans son opération signifiante d'origine" (P.M., 65) -- we must enquire deeper into this original stage of composition.

Having said this, a problem immediately arises: the manner in which we are to proceed with such an enquiry remains unclear; though in this respect Merleau-Ponty himself provides an invaluable clue:

> il nous faut considérer la parole avant qu'elle soit prononcée, sur le fond du silence qui la précède, qui ne cesse pas de l'accompagner, et sans lequel elle ne dirait rien; davantage, il nous faut être sensible à ces fils de silence dont le tissu de la parole est entremêlé (P.M., 64).

Yet once again we note that the notion here employed to describe the fecund moment of creativity, namely, silence, is itself mired in mystery and elusiveness. Initially, then -- and most surprisingly so -- at least on the surface

of the matter, it appears that Merleau-Ponty's conception of silence has definite affinities to the terms used to describe this aspect of the experience by Blake, Shelley and Hazlitt, etc.; there are uncanny similarities between saying that the creative process is intertwined with silence and saying that it depends upon Muses or inspiration or the unconscious. Indeed, during the very first moments of inspiration, before one has gained enough clarity to write precisely this or that, is one not silent as one *receives* the inspiration, as one searches around the room for a pen and a scrap of paper? And before the pen rushes along the paper as if it were trying to catch exactly what it wanted to say, like an animal pursuing its prey, it remains poised, quite still, as the author's attention focuses upon the task of writing and the intensity grows within him. When first visited by the Muse, one listens, lips sealed, to what she will impart to us, a few words or images, perhaps a sentence or two, before we ourselves reach out to receive the offering, to appropriate it by beginning to write on the page before us, even though somehow during this process the initial form of the words and the direction in which they first seemed to be leading may surprise us.[2]

And so the question remains: if in our attempts to understand more clearly the creative nature of language we first note that it flows from an essential, preliminary, fecund moment of silence, like a fragrant flower from a scentless bud, can we ourselves go any further in our research, for does not silence refuse itself to thought?

Yes and no. Obviously it is not the easiest of phenomena to describe in detail. At this point, however, it would be well to remember one seemingly

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[2] It is interesting to note that in the margin of Merleau-Ponty's text quoted above he remarked: "on ne sait pas ce qu'on dit, on sait après avoir dit." Cf. also the following passage from Signes: "exprimer pour le sujet parlant, c'est prendre conscience; il n'exprime pas seulement pour les autres, il exprime pour savoir lui-même ce qu'il vise" (113).

simple point, one which will open up the way for further serious enquiry: what we are speaking of, silence, is not an abstract, trumped-up concept but, rather, an actual *lived experience*. What is thus in question is the *experience* of silence, and only an enquiry into this experience could possibly reveal to us its lived meaning for the speaking subject. Consequently, since our research concerns lived experience, one useful method of enquiry will be the phenomenological method. Perhaps the outline of the project is best delineated by Merleau-Ponty in the following passage:

> si nous voulons comprendre le langage dans son opération signifiante d'origine, il nous faut feindre de n'avoir jamais parlé, opérer sur lui une réduction sans laquelle il se cacherait encore à nos yeux en nous reconduisant à ce qu'il nous signifie, le regarder comme les sourds regardent ceux qui parlent, et comparer l'art du langage aux autres arts de l'expression qui n'ont pas recours à lui, essayer de le voir comme l'un de ces arts muets (P.M., 65).

There are actually two important aspects of Merleau-Ponty's study introduced here: first, the influence of Malraux is illustrated in Merleau-Ponty's intention to comprehend language by comparing it to other mute or silent arts of expression, namely, painting; and secondly, as I have mentioned, the role of the phenomenological method is clarified by mention of a phenomenological reduction, performed upon language, which will allow us to regard the phenomenon itself as a primordial structure of our experience *as* it is experienced by us before our scientific or theoretical notions instruct us about what it ought to be. In this way, then, the reduction brings us back to our original lived experience of language.

And so we must consider this one aspect of language anew, wherein language begins to introduce and sediment new meanings. Yet in examining this particular aspect of language so carefully we are not focusing our enquiries absurdly. For it is in this moment that language is so alive, as it vibrates with the energy of new turns of phrase, new metaphors, as it grows and develops, expressing meanings that have never before been expressed.

What I have thus attempted to do is consider the issues schematically from a literary point of view, asking after clarifications of what exactly they are and how they might be addressed. If a philosopher is as bold as to contend that the origins of meaning in language are illustrated most clearly in literary composition, it would be wise to enquire into what the literati have to say for themselves. Quite surprisingly, too, they have corroborated some initial findings -- the notion of silence, so important in Merleau-Ponty's writing, pervades some of their own ideas on the matter. Yet Merleau-Ponty's approach is more rigorously philosophical.

Having first considered the various meanings of silence stemming from the structuralist influence on Merleau-Ponty's writing, our subsequent enquiry into the meaning and role of silence in language and lived experience will be a most delicate affair. At this point it would be impracticable to pretend to a lucid objectivity, inconceivable to regard the themes disinterestedly, worthless to employ simple textual analysis of secondary sources. The main reason for the inappropriateness of these types of practices to the present portion of this work is that the very performance of the analysis itself is a lived experience involving language in which the present author proposes new meanings in the form of his conclusions. Indeed, to perform such an analysis would be to overlook the basic peculiarity that *the present study of* language, lived experience and silence *is itself* a lived experience

necessarily involving the intertwining of language and silence. The circularity is perplexing and inescapable -- though not seriously problematic.

Merleau-Ponty explains that this type of circularity does not create problems but instead reveals two significant aspects of language: first, that it is a coherent, structured system in the sense that Saussure explains; and secondly, that it is not an *object* we simply use:

> tout ce que je dis du langage le suppose, mais cela n'invalide pas ce que je dis, cela révèle seulement que le langage se touche et se comprend lui-même, cela montre seulement qu'il n'est pas objet, qu'il est susceptible d'une reprise, qu'il est accessible de l'intérieur (P.M., 35).

The last part of this passage is highly important; indeed, it provides the crucial tie between the earlier part of this enquiry, into silence and the structure of language, and this portion of the enquiry, into the lived experience of language and silence. To admit that language is highly structured and is not an instrument we simply use, while at the same time to proclaim that it is accessible from the inside is to link intimately the structural considerations with the phenomenological ones. When Merleau-Ponty affirms that language is accessible from the inside he means that we can learn about it by attending to our lived experience of it. He thus intends that we should not dismiss the circularity or attempt to ground it, but that the circularity itself indicates where the locus of the enquiry ought to be. As he writes later in Le Visible et l'invisible:

> la philosophie [...] est langage, repose sur le langage; mais cela ne la disqualifie ni pour parler du langage, ni pour parler du pré-langage et du monde muet qui les double: au contraire, elle

> est langage opérant, ce langage-là qui ne peut se savoir que du dedans, par la pratique, est ouvert sur les choses, appelé par les voix du silence (168).

Therefore, the most favourable manner in which to proceed would involve, at least in part, exegetical phenomenological writing. The choice of this method will, I hope, serve to acknowledge tacitly throughout the chapter the paradoxical nature of the task undertaken at the present stage as it sets up a form of dialogue between the present author, the literati and Merleau-Ponty's texts.[3]

The writing to which I would now like to attend is my own writing; not my own academic writing, but my own writing that attempts to be creative in a more literary manner. Yet the reader may ask what merits there are in paying attention to one's own prose when there are the great works of literary giants and their very own detailed reports about the creative process. Indeed, such writing is readily available; I have already discussed some of it, and would like to discuss more. But to proceed without turning to one's own experience of the creative process would be to neglect the fundamental importance of lived experience to the enquiry.

As a young man growing up in a family where all but one of my male elders has experienced some degree of serious depression, I have been moved to wonder about my own fate. Yet because of the importance of the matter to me, after some time this wondering has called for a more complete expression, and this it has found in the form of writing. What is it about the lives of my male elders that has led these otherwise active, industrious, humorous and loving men into helpless, pitiable states of depression?

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[3] For a full description of the process involved in exegetical phenomenological writing, v. van Manen, 67.

Ironically, out of these men the one I find myself closest to emotionally is also the one who has experienced this state most acutely. And so I must reflect upon what patterns of behaviour led him into that terrible place, and I must determine if these are patterns I myself have adopted, and if so why they led him astray, and indeed how they might be avoided.

So much of my own writing has focused upon the relationship of a son with a particular male elder of his family. This act of writing is nothing but my attempt to make sense of experiences I have lived through, experiences that, in forming the substances of my life, have determined, almost in spite of myself, the way I am. I have attempted to observe not only my own relationship but also those of other young men my age in the hope of clarifying different manners of interaction and the subsequent ramifications of those different ways of being to the general outcome and quality of one's life. And what I have discovered is that this type of writing has actually aided me in coming to understand that my attempts to distance myself from this man as I was growing up were really outward manifestations of my fear of following along behind him into a similar fate. In paying close attention to the dynamics of this relationship as I write about them, I have come to understand how my hitherto unarticulated fear has created an awkward dynamic between myself and him. I have also found that, as far away as I went, I could not deny that I still carried with me many of his opinions and even some of his patterns of behaviour. It now seems to me that the only way I would be able to avoid such a breakdown would be to know more about it. So now I realize that for my own well-being, indeed for the development of my own maturity and individuality, I must again come closer to this man in order to find out more about what he endured, so that I myself might, at the

very least, know the telling signs, and might, at the very most, avoid them -- and in the process come to know him better.

The most peculiar thing is that the formulations of such conclusions has been aided by my writing. In writing I come to understand experiences to which my memory has continually returned, like a tongue to a sore tooth, but whose clearly articulated meaning has nevertheless escaped me.

When I sit down to write about all of this the writing most often takes creative forms, the themes of which end up as attempts to clarify for myself some of the multifarious meanings of the relationship in question. And when I sit down to write in a more creative mode, I realize that what makes me do so is a strong sense that I have something that needs to be said. Oftentimes this sense may arise at the most inopportune moment, forcing me to forfeit a task with which I may be immediately involved. Often, too, this sense may be urgent, as there may be a few words or even whole phrases that have already formed, a sentence or two that I can say out loud. The desire to write them down is spurred on, on one hand, by a vague sense that, in some manner of which I am not yet aware, they may be meaningful, and on the other hand, by the knowledge that if I don't write them down they will be forgotten and, with them, any meaning they may have held. I would thus contend that the experience of writing is exclusive to the act of writing down this or that; in other words, one cannot write in one's head.

In the event that the sense of urgency I experience does not arise from the need to write down a few pre-formed phrases lest they be forgotten, it is bolstered by an image in which I sense more directly a yet indistinct meaning. This could either be a distant memory or something experienced more recently, situations in which I descry the manifestation of a theme. Examples of this type of scenario are plentiful; one has only to think of Robert Burns'

poem "To a Mouse" or even John Keats' "To a Nightingale." The familiar story of the genesis of Burns' poem begins with the poet ploughing a field and suddenly unearthing a field-mouse's nest. What might have been a rather insignificant encounter for some was not for Burns; it served as the root of the following verse, a veritable testament to his surcharged emotion, his acute awareness and sensibility. The poem is subtitled "On Turning Her up in Her Nest with the Plow," and Burns' own brother claims that it was composed right there in the field while the poet was still holding the plow (Abrams, II, 91). Indeed, the very first line of the poem testifies to this, for it describes the direct experience that moved the poet to write, the experience in which, we imagine, Burns perceived an instance of the themes of our struggling against forces over which we have no control, of the human being's essential attachment to the land, themes the rest of the poem would go on to develop: "Wee, sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie, / O, what a panic's in thy breastie!"

The case of John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" is similar. In Keats' situation, however, it is the feeling inspired in the poet as a result of a direct perceptual experience that opens the verse rather than, as in Burns' case, an account of a direct perceptual experience. According to Charles Brown, with whom Keats was living at that time,

> in the spring of 1819, a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass plot under the plum tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind his books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale (Abrams, II, 819).

Although both of these cases are slightly different, the essential structure of them is the same.[4] There are two essential elements that are important to note: first of all, that the writers have been in some way moved by a direct lived experience; and secondly, that this experience ends up, at the completion of the piece of writing, actually denoting a meaning which far transcends its initial, apparently insignificant appearance.

What is more difficult to determine from these historical examples is the actual substance of the writing process, the character of the development of the experience after the initial fecund moment of inspiration. Let us now attempt an examination of this portion of the process.

I have discovered that a most peculiar thing occurs once I have actually found pen and paper and sat down to write. Seated behind my desk, I become momentarily oblivious of my surroundings; I am not always aware of how the chair feels, nor am I aware of the sensation of the pen between my fingers or of the vibrations it causes in my hand as it inscribes the paper. At first, the most dominant aspect of the experience is my concentration on the task at hand. This concentration arises at the very moment I begin to write down what it is that I had believed was pre-formed in my thoughts, whether it be words, or an image or a direct experience. What I have often found at this moment is that the words I believed were pre-formed in my thoughts and only had to be translated into written words on paper slither out of my reach. When I write down the words I apparently had in my thoughts, I discover either that the phrase was not as complete as I originally believed or that it

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[4] This type of experience is also corroborated by V. S. Naipaul in his account of the origin of his own eloquent book about his personal journey as a writer, The Enigma of Arrival (309-310).

needs a revision here or there. Therefore, the notion of a pre-formed thought translating directly into language does not seem to apply. Sometimes, even after rewriting words or phrases, I am still not satisfied, and I ask myself: "does this reformulation actually sound better? which words express more clearly what I think it is I want to say?" While this monologue continues I am focusing intently on the work at hand, and if I cannot solve the questions I ask myself, I nevertheless go on writing, adding to what I already have on paper.

In order to bring ourselves closer to the original silence where language speaks anew, let us examine closer what is contained in this intent focus, which appears to play a crucial role in the experience. This focus is definitely a form of concentration, but it is not an exclusively "mental" effort involving only rational thought; rather, it appears to involve a substantial amount of intuition, which involves a close awareness of one's body and the signs it sends.[5]

So what then is the actual substance of this intermingling of feeling, intuition and rational thought? After the initial words have been written down, then rewritten, then questioned, there is a pause -- what next? Indeed, there appears to be nothing present as there was to begin with -- no phrases even partially formed. Nevertheless, with pen in hand I focus hard while staring at the paper; I doodle in the margin; I furrow my brow, take my head in my free hand and squeeze and pull at my temples with thumb and

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[5] This quality of the writing experience is also substantiated by Robertson Davies. Describing his own experience, he explains: "whatever I may be doing, the literary aspect of my mind is fully at work: it is not only the hours spent at the typewriter, but the hours spent in other kinds of work and in many kinds of diversion when I am busily observing, shaping, rejecting, and undergoing a wide variety of feelings that are the essential material of writing. Notice that I said feelings -- not thoughts, but feelings." Making some general conclusions, he adds: "the writer is necessarily a man of feeling and intuition; he need not be an original thinker [...] I do not say that writers are creatures of untutored genius; often they are very intelligent people: but the best part of their intelligence is of the feeling and intuitive order" (131-132).

forefinger. All the while my attention is directed to the experience I am considering, to the image or the memory. I turn it over in my head, I walk around it, I stand and regard it -- I am taken as if by a painting. Yet no words accompany the concentration; so I wait, and then the image is lost. Presently the intensity wanes and my attention is once again filled with the things around me. I turn to look out of the window; I notice the hardness of the surface of the wooden chair on which I am seated. Soon the intensity returns, and it is as if I enter a reverie; I close my eyes momentarily, searching all the while, searching for what to say next. Once more I experience the gap or void, the unfulfilled desire to speak. For what seems like a long period of time I have written nothing; I have been silent, attempting to bring myself into a closer affinity with the experience itself so that I might know it better. Then, finally, out of this silence, and apparently on its own terms, there arises a series of words to follow the first.

The description of this experience contains two significant elements that seem uncanny. First of all, there is the case of the apparent autonomy of language, language that appears to ebb and flow of its own accord; and secondly, the apparent gap or void in the writer's attention during concentration. I believe that these two aspects of the experience are significant and, thus, I would now like to allow these two motifs to direct the subsequent analysis.

There is really no better way to put the matter than to say that, at a certain point, the words *just simply arrive*. To be sure, there is concentration on my part; there is my deliberate focusing on the task. However, there seems to be little causal connection between an act of my volition and the arrival of the words in my head. The actual arrival of the words themselves seems to occur unbidden. This moment is not a sole, isolated point in time, it is rather an

essential part of an ongoing process. Once I actually have words to write down, the process does become more dependent upon my conscious volition, but this dependence is not complete. I choose to write and then I choose which words or phrases sound the best, and I change the order here and there accordingly. I must constantly hone my words so that their meaning might approach the vague sense I have of exactly what I want to say. Nevertheless, as soon as I am in need of new words, as soon as I sense something missing or awry, even the need to complete a phrase or complete a partially articulated image, I once again move into that state of deep attention, of intent focus, and encounter a certain blankness, out of which, once more, the words, my language, inevitably arises, apparently of its own accord. Such a process need not -- and indeed *is* not -- clearly demarcated. As I write the intensity of my focus changes only by degree, and this change in degree can occur quickly and smoothly. All the while, under the scratching of my pen on the paper, the piece of writing is growing longer, developing, as if under my supervision, but apparently not under my complete control.

In order to articulate faithfully this lived experience, I must add that it is as if the words arrive from somewhere about which I know nothing. At this point I must nevertheless resist my strong unexamined penchant to say that it seems to me that they arrive from somewhere *outside of me* -- indeed, at first that is what I wrote until I later revised it. After more questioning and further examination, I do not believe that this is how the experience seems. It is certainly true that I really have absolutely no idea at all about the source of these words; furthermore, they seem to arrive unbidden. Thus, it is easily understood how one might mistake them as originating from a source outside oneself.

This analysis reveals, I believe, the basis of the reason why, traditionally, artists such as William Blake have allotted this baffling aspect of the creative process, which is manifested through the most intimate workings of the imagination, to a source actually outside the self. Such an attribution is the sign of a decidedly human inclination, for since time immemorial human beings have excelled at explaining what they do not understand by invoking a higher power. And it is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty himself is sensitive to this way of thinking, though he is opposed to a major consequence thereof, one that necessitates the deprecation of an inherent value of being human, i.e., being endowed with a creative imagination, allotting this to some elusive higher power. The most unusual thing is that although Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of a higher power, remaining in line with the atheistic existential climate in which he lived and worked, he nevertheless strongly resists swinging to the other extreme, where one would lose all reverence and appreciation for the mystery inherent in the process. Although Merleau-Ponty explains this mysterious aspect of the experience in terms of essential structures of being human in an intersubjective world, he does not explain the mystery away; there is some residual doubt about how much he can really explain. In short, he leaves room for the ineffable. Indeed, there are numerous places in La Prose du monde where he refers to the imaginative creative process as *miraculous*:

> et certes c'est là un grand miracle, dont le mot d'*homme* ne doit pas nous masquer l'étrangeté. Du moins pouvons-nous voir ici que ce miracle est habituel, qu'il nous est naturel, qu'il commence avec notre existence incarnée et qu'il n'y a pas lieu d'en chercher l'explication dans quelque Esprit du Monde qui opérerait en nous sans nous, et penserait à notre place en deçà

> du monde perçu, à l'échelle microscopique: ici l'esprit du monde c'est nous, dès que nous savons *nous mouvoir*, dès que nous savons *regarder* (P.M., 108-109).

This quotation is telling in the manner in which it introduces what Merleau-Ponty argues to be the source of our creative expression, our incarnate existence, or, more precisely, the point of perceptual contact between a person and the world. And it is to this very point that the significative attention attempts to return us, and what language tries to articulate is the very substance of this original contact between person and world. Once again we note how language is bound essentially to the silence of our primordial experience of the world.

Keeping this analysis close at hand, let us now pass to the second element of the significative intention that was revealed to us above. A most uncanny aspect of this portion of the experience of creative writing is that, unlike perception for example, for a matter of moments, or even longer sometimes, it actually appears that there is nothing to fill the other side of my attention. Literally nothing. It appears to me that there is a blank.[6] It is this most unusual quality that Merleau-Ponty terms "[le] *vœu muet* qui est l'*intention* de signifier" (S., 113, emphasis added). Its role he characterizes as follows:

> il s'agit, pour ce vœu muet qu'est l'intention significative, de réaliser un certain arrangement des instruments déjà signifiants ou des significations déjà parlantes [...] qui suscite chez l'auditeur le pressentiment d'une signification autre et neuve et inversement accomplisse chez celui qui parle ou qui écrit

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[6] Cf. S., 113, where the significative intention is termed a privation, a lack, a gap or void.

> l'ancrage de la signification inédite dans les significations déjà disponibles (S., 113).[7]

Towards the end of the passage we find an account of the essence of this desire: it is to create anew. The epithet Merleau-Ponty uses to qualify the desire or wish is significant; the adjective "muet," although it could be readily translated as "mute" or "silent" could also signify "speechless." This latter translation would seem to fit the quality of the experience perfectly, for, indeed, it appears that words are one thing the desire lacks, one thing it sorely wants. But, of course, it is not just any words, but those words the author feels are most apt, i.e., words the writer finds most fitting, words that best signify what it is he feels he wishes to say. In this manner, then, the desire is an intention to signify.

We have thus discovered that the intention to signify comprises an uncanny privation as well as an attempt on the part of the writer to establish a closer affinity to the experiences in question, an attempt necessitated in part by the writer's belief that these experiences are somehow significant. A lucid description of the result of the intertwining of these two elements of the significative intention is presented by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke in his only novel, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge.

Early in the work, the main character, a young man of twenty-eight years, admits to having completed some minor pieces of creative writing, but bemoans the general weakness in writing undertaken by someone who lacks significant life experiences. "Poems are not," explains Rilke, "simply emotions (one has emotions early enough) -- they are experiences" (19). Indeed, they are

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[7] Cf. P.M., 51 and 64. It is also worth noting that this characterization is greatly influenced by Saussure; the notion of arrangement recalls immediately the idea of structure.

experiences translated into words. In a long, eloquent and moving passage, Rilke recounts the varied types of significant lived experiences he believes are necessary to make a truly relevant and meaningful piece of writing:

> for the sake of a single poem you must see many cities, many people and Things, you must understand animals, must feel how birds fly, and know the gesture which small flowers make when they open in the morning. You must be able to think back to streets in unknown neighborhoods, to unexpected encounters, and to partings you had long seen coming; to days of childhood whose mystery is still unexplained" (19-20).

Nevertheless, experiences such as these alone will not suffice: "you must have memories of many nights of love," explains Rilke further, "each one different from all the others [....] But you must also have been beside the dying, must have sat beside the dead in the room with the open window and the scattered noises" (20). Finally, Rilke proclaims that it is not enough simply to have lived through such situations and to have retained memories of them: instead, one must be able to forget them and have the patience for them to return. And what occurs after one's having forgotten them is significant; between such a time as one forgets them and the moment one recalls them, the memories themselves permeate one's very being:

> only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves -- only then can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them (20).

Obviously Rilke is prone to a certain degree of exaggeration in this passage. If one took him literally one would believe it impossible for a brilliant poem to be written by anyone under the age of about thirty-five. And, of course, we have the case of Rimbaud to rebut this claim, since he *quit* writing astonishing poetry at age nineteen.

Doubtless Rilke does not mean that one must experience these and only these types of experiences in order to write a good poem. Rather, since the variety of experiences he describes are significant life experiences, it could be inferred that he intends that life ought to be lived profoundly rather than superficially before one is able to write meaningfully about it. Most important to this stage of the analysis is the twist Rilke adds at the end of the passage; not only must one live through these experiences and remember them, he declares, one must also forget them. However, forgetting them does not imply that they are erased from one's memory; rather, what Rilke means is that one must allow them to penetrate one's very being. Therefore, Rilke's notion of "forgetting" indicates both of the elements we have been considering. First of all, the forgetfulness implies the gap in the significative intention; it denotes the experience in which the writer seems to be unable to reach out to what it is he wants to say. Secondly, the result of the forgetfulness actually allows the writer to enter into a deeper affinity with these experiences as they were originally lived, an affinity not possible unless one continues working and remains attentive to them. We could liken this notion of a profound affinity to one's lived experience to Keats' "poetic feeling." And one could very well liken this notion of "poetic feeling" to what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "le sentiment de la vie qui habite l'écrivain" (P.M., 67). What lends support to these comparisons is the idea Rilke expresses at the end of the passage, namely, that, as we have found above, the words with which one articulates

such experiences arise out of the experience itself, to some extent as if of their own accord. Indeed, the passage is uncanny in the sense that its description of the process involved in writing meaningful prose devotes a great deal of time to discussing a variety of experiences before even mentioning language, almost suddenly, at the very end. In so doing, the passage gives the impression that, as we have found above, after attending closely to the experiences for some time, suddenly words arise. And Rilke says that these words arise out of the experience itself, thus indicating how language and the silence of our primordial experience of the world are inextricably bound together.

The general sentiment Rilke expresses in this passage is corroborated by Aldous Huxley. Huxley writes: "experience is not a matter of having actually swum the Hellespont, or danced with the dervishes, or slept in a doss-house. It is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and co-ordinating. Experience is not what happens to a man: it is what a man does with what happens to him" (quoted in Davies, 125). Although Huxley does not express this view in the exact manner Rilke does, the essence of what each writer contends is the same. Both writers are of the opinion that one must not simply live through one's experiences, one must also reflect upon them to render them meaningful. Huxley is more direct and more radical, affirming outright that one must actually do something with one's experience before it even becomes experience at all -- which is a very exaggerated point of view. On the other hand, Rilke states that one must experience life, allow it to permeate one's very being, and then speak of this experience only after having come into such a close affinity with it. In both cases -- though most

explicitly in Huxley's case -- the dominant sense is that experience itself is devoid of any real content and meaning before it is articulated.

The moment of articulation is the moment at which the silent wish finally becomes word, and our analysis of this moment necessitates a clarification, a reminder. The meaning we articulate and, thus, the meaning one gives to one's experience is something over which we do not have direct control. Our analysis of the significative intention has revealed that language is not simply a vehicle the author uses to articulate him or herself. It is not as if my intention to write is a conscious volition which, knowing its object in advance, goes in search of it, just as one might go in search of a hammer to secure a nail.[8] There is no such direct corroboration between the conscious will to articulate, the words to say it with and the meaning of the experience. Language is not an instrument at our disposal, but an active participant in one's search for meaning in existence. There is no explicit knowledge in advance that need only be translated from thought into spoken or written words. Rather, language itself -- in this case, the written word -- is that through which meaning arises. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

> qu'exprime donc le langage, s'il n'exprime pas des pensées? Il présente ou plutôt il *est* la prise de position du sujet dans le monde de ses significations [....] Le geste phonétique[9] réalise, pour le sujet parlant et pour ceux qui l'écoutent, *une certaine structuration de l'expérience, une certaine modulation de l'existence,* exactement comme un comportement de mon corps investit pour moi et pour autrui les objets qui m'entourent d'une certaine signification (Ph.P., 225, emphasis added).

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[8] This image is to be found in P.M., 64.

[9] And here we understand also "le geste écrit."

Along with this structuring of experience comes the genesis of meaning, which implies most significantly that the speaking subject him or herself, through the very act of attempting to write or speak creatively, has arrived at a state of knowledge. "Exprimer, pour le sujet parlant," explains Merleau-Ponty, "c'est prendre conscience; il n'exprime pas seulement pour les autres, il exprime pour savoir lui-même ce qu'il vise" (S., 113). Most importantly, this point necessitates a rethinking of many of the traditional assumptions about what it is to be a writer and to use a language. The most radical claim, of course, is that knowledge itself does not arise until the experience is articulated.[10]

Finally, then, we can determine with great clarity the meanings of silence that have emerged from this portion of the analysis. In the first case, we have found that the experiences one attempts to articulate are shrouded in silence in the sense that they are lived through before they are reflected upon. Silence, then, applies to this emptiness of pre-reflective experience. Nevertheless, there is an extraordinary uncanniness surrounding this silence. Traditionally, phenomenologists have contended that the silence of pre-reflective experience contains meaning. As one critic writes: "the spoken meaning is always dependent upon a meaning which precedes speech" (Kwant, 80-81). However, a problem arises from this type of assertion, to wit, precisely how do we understand a meaning that precedes precise

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[10] Although Merleau-Ponty does not *discuss* knowledge explicitly, such a statement as I have made here can be consistently inferred from many passages similar to the one I have just presented. In this passage Merleau-Ponty does use the verb *savoir*, whose general connotation is that of "knowledge"; therefore, what is essentially stated in a passage such as this one is that I do not *know* what the meaning is until I have expressed it. Despite his taciturnity concerning knowledge, Merleau-Ponty has a great deal to say about the notion of truth. Truth, he argues, is sedimentation, the incarnation of meaning into experience: "à ce moment quelque chose a été fondée en signification, une expérience a été transformée en son sens, est devenue vérité. La vérité est un autre nom de la sédimentation" (S., 120). Consequently, one can infer a relationship between truth, expression and knowledge.

articulation? The conservative solution is to vacillate, asserting that, well, one cannot truly comprehend it, but it is nevertheless present. As Remy Kwant explains: "it is, of course, impossible to describe the meaning which precedes speech" (Kwant, 80-81).

Our above analysis has revealed a sense in which this interpretation could be understood. When one sits down to write, for example, one is pulled towards certain experiences that one feels to be significant. The themes preoccupying an author are the themes he or she determines to be important, although an explicit statement of them may be impossible to give at the beginning of a work.[11] Thus, it remains true that when the author sits down to write he or she does possess a vague feeling that this particular experience or scenario has meaning or significance, more so than an other. In this manner, then, one could argue that pre-verbal lived experience is meaningful. However, notice that what occurs is that the author has only a *vague* sense that this experience is meaningful, and he or she does not *know* the meaning before its explicit articulation. Therefore, is it really intelligible to state that pre-verbal lived experience is meaningful in the sense that we normally understand this word?

Consider the following example. Let us imagine that two people manage to single out a few pivotal events in their lives, events they know have effected them profoundly. Imagine that the first person goes through life knowing simply this, that these have been important experiences; and imagine that the second person determines either to talk to someone about these experiences or to write about them. Now in and through the process of focused talking or writing, this second person is attempting to bring him or

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[11] Many an author has explained how a particular work was begun without having much of an idea about where exactly it was leading.

herself into a closer affinity with these experiences, and, consequently, he or she will come to understand in what sense these experiences have significance. The first person will have an inclination of a certain significance, but if this is not stated clearly it is highly probable that even this person's vague understanding of the event will gradually pale. Could one really imagine stating that the first person and the second person have both found meaning in experience? The vast difference between a meaning that is clearly articulated and a meaning about which a person has only a vague sense is so profound that, I suggest, in each case one is actually referring to different things. Therefore, to hold that speaking or writing is dependent upon an antecedent meaning, as many phenomenologists do, is not yet radical enough.

Am I then stating that unarticulated experience is vacuous? I would not wish to be so harsh. In any member of a society's life there is a struggle against how either tradition or family dictates how one ought to live, and these institutions are themselves sources of meaning.[12] The important point is that they are not sources of *personal* meaning, and therefore one could contend that for an individual they are not necessarily truly meaningful.

The claim I am arguing in favour of here is supported by the contention that the use of language is that through which one's experience is structured and meaning is introduced into one's life. Yet there is a second aspect to this contention, from which one can establish an even more radical conclusion. And this contention is supported by Merleau-Ponty's affirmation that it is in the very act of creative writing, but even in creative speaking, that the speaking subject actually comes to *know* himself better. The writer sings the world anew, gives new meaning to his experience; in doing so, he also

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[12] Cf. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this point in P.M., 137-139.

learns about the person he is, about what he thinks, believes and desires. As Robertson Davies explains, one of the distinct features of being a writer is "[his] inner struggle towards self-knowledge and self-recognition, which he makes manifest through his art" (123).

The most radical conclusion that can be established consistently from these findings is that the act of the creative use of language is an act of existential self-making. If the notion of silence ultimately implies the relative absence of real meaning in existence and, furthermore, if in speaking anew of one's world one reaches a wider plane of self-knowledge, then one effectively brings into being a fuller, more meaningful self, which is essentially a new self. Thus, the act of a creative use of language is an act of self-making.

Nevertheless, we must be careful to note that this does not occur in accordance with the speaking subject's wishes, for there is the mysterious autonomy of language -- due in part, as we have seen, to its structural nature -- which leads us on. The type of existential self-making that the use of creative writing or speaking involves is not akin to a rational choice; the relative autonomy of language introduces an element of mystery into the process.

✣ IV ✣

## Merleau-Ponty and the Poststructuralist Conception of Selfhood: The Nature of the Speaking Subject

Although after La Prose du monde Merleau-Ponty proceeds to rethink many of the issues he has given attention to throughout his career, developing his philosophy in the direction of a deeper ontological investigation, there nevertheless remains in the works of both of these periods a distinct residue of structuralist principles. The prominent influence of Saussure's structuralism is felt more acutely in the works of the middle period, where it vies for prominence, challenging some of Merleau-Ponty's fundamental phenomenological tenets, such as the importance of the speaking subject's lived experience. Such an extreme tension is peculiar, to be sure, a peculiarity marked by the intermingling of two very different systems of thought. Nevertheless, if placed in the proper context the peculiarity can prove to be highly instructive; and this context is the course of a very influential form of continental thought, namely, poststructuralism.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy stands at a pivotal point in the development of recent continental thought. His attempt to overcome Husserl's phenomenological ontology and some of the problems it leads to -- for example, the problem of inter-subjectivity and the radical subjectivization

of being -- is essentially an effort to surmount a particularly "modern" conception of subjectivity and the account of the genesis of meaning in the world it implies. Essentially, Merleau-Ponty endeavours to go beyond this "modern" view, passed down to him from Kant through Husserl, that the meaning to be found in the world is deposited there by the transcendental activities of consciousness (Dillon, ix). To overcome this perspective, and especially in the Phénoménologie, transcendental consciousness becomes embodied and is existentialized. Yet in the middle period, as we have seen, the precedence of our bodily and perceptual experience in the constitution of the life-world is usurped by language. And it is precisely this movement towards the prominence of language that proves to be representative of developing trends in continental thinking after Merleau-Ponty's untimely death. "As the transcendental subject receded," writes one commentator, "language flooded in to take its place" (Dillon, ix). Merleau-Ponty's work of the middle period is therefore representative of the development of modern continental thought (and specifically poststructuralism) away from transcendental subjectivity towards language. Yet one can be even more direct. The importance Merleau-Ponty allots to written language in founding meaning in the world is a harbinger of the enormous significance of textuality in poststructuralist thinking. Indeed, one of the most fundamental tenets of poststructuralism is the idea that both we ourselves and our world -- indeed everything -- is a text that we read, and read meaning into:

> we read ourselves, as we read world and others, thus all we know and what we know is what we read. Because *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. Or if there is, our only access to it is through signifiers: the only meaning we can find in self-world-other is significance imparted -- or mediated -- by signifiers. Because I

> must *read* self-world-other, these *things themselves* elude me: effectively, they are transformed into texts (Dillon, xi, emphasis added).

What we have been enquiring into is the role and meaning of silence in the speaking subject's language and lived experience, attempting along the way to clarify the sense of a paradoxical and inescapable intertwining of language and silence. Implicitly, these considerations point to a conception of the speaking subject, who remains an embodied subject, but whose embodiment is challenged during the works of the middle period by the autonomy of language, an autonomy so considerable that, at one point, Merleau-Ponty even calls the speaking subject's language "une langue anonyme" (P.M., 160). What I should like to do here is draw from these considerations a conception of the speaking subject that remains implicit in Merleau-Ponty's work of this period. In order to do so, I shall first outline the basic notions essential to the theory of the self developed in recent poststructuralist thought, a theory that will serve as a foil for disclosing Merleau-Ponty's conception. This is why concentration on the middle period of Merleau-Ponty's writing on language is so important, because it is here that he grapples most outwardly with Saussure's basic structuralist principles. We are thus able to compare how he chooses to deal with them with how poststructuralism does so. In the resulting juxtaposition between these two theories, I hope to show how, in recent poststructuralist thinking, the speaking subject is deconstructed in ways that are inadequate to the phenomenon.[1]

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[1] I would like to note that I am acutely aware that the topic of the present chapter could very well serve as a thesis unto itself. Indeed, the task of outlining the basic notions essential to the poststructuralist conception of the self could well fill chapters fraught with hotly disputed and conflicting interpretations. Happily, though, there are regularly agreed upon

As pervasive a force as poststructuralist thinking has become, and as varied as its influences may be, one formidable doctrine it has engendered, a doctrine that has come to play a significant role in many disciplines, such as philosophy, literary criticism as well as psychoanalysis, develops out of a tension similar to the tension between phenomenology and structuralism in the work of Merleau-Ponty's middle period. This theory can be summed up by stating that not only is our manner of understanding the speaking subject effected through language, but, furthermore -- and this is the most radical claim -- that the subject is actually constituted through its use of language, and more precisely through self-narration.[2] On this account the subject is no longer understood as a pre-linguistic entity, complete unto itself, which merely employs language; rather, it is held to be a product of language, whilst language is understood as possessing a significant degree of autonomy. Essentially, then, the subject is deconstructed and refused any transcendental authority:

> this position, in a somewhat Sartrean fashion, considers the self as a result of discursive praxis rather than as either (a) a substantial entity having ontological priority over praxis, or (b)

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commonalities, and these are what I shall occupy myself with. My purpose here is merely to sketch the terrain, to indicate pitfalls and paths rather than explore the field in full measure. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the present chapter does not become, as a result, devoid of content. Drawing a conception of the speaking subject from the previous analyses and juxtaposing it against a conception of the self that has come to pervade an important variety of continental thought will serve as an interesting contrast and suggest possibilities of for an interesting critique.

[2] The use of the term subject to refer to what we normally think of as an individual person is not unmotivated. As Kaja Silverman explains: "the term 'subject' designates a quite different semantic and ideological space from that indicated by the more familiar term 'individual.' The second of these terms dates from the Renaissance, and it still bears the traces of the dominant philosophical systems of that time -- systems which afforded to consciousness the very highest premium. The concept of subjectivity [...] marks a radical departure from this philosophical tradition by giving a more central place to the unconscious and to cultural overdetermination than it does to consciousness" (126).

> as a self with epistemological priority -- an originator of meaning (Kerby, 210).

What proves most befuddling about this conception of selfhood is its thoroughly entrenched insistence that the subject actually comes into being through its use of language, and especially through its *self-narration*, a thesis that does not seem consistent with the understanding of language as autonomous. This radical claim of self-narration is perhaps best outlined in literary theory, and is stated clearly in the following passage from Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author":

> linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as 'I' is nothing other than the instance saying 'I'; language knows a subject, not a person, and this subject, empty outside the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it (quoted in Kerby, 212).

A similar view to the one expressed by Barthes is also found in the work of the linguist Emile Beneveniste. Says Benveniste: "what does I refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic [...] the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language" (quoted in Kerby, 212). Fundamental tenets such as these engender radical points of view amongst literary critics and theorists, who argue that the text itself has obtained autonomy from its author. Indeed, the whole idea of what it is to be an author is transformed. No longer does the writer have authorial autonomy over the text, for it is now more the case that the text "writes" the author. This thesis of textual autonomy, known also, following Barthes, as the "death of the author," is therefore based in a certain very important conception of language. One of

the most essential aspects of both of the views expressed in the above passages from Barthes and Beneveniste is that language creates the subject rather than the reverse. In other words, language is understood as the means by which the subject is constituted *qua* human subject (Kerby, 212). Hence the notions that the subject is "empty outside the very enunciation which defines it" and that "the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of writing."

Now such radical and influential perspectives as these are only possible on the understanding of language as comprising a considerable degree of autonomy. Indeed, it would be impossible to assert that the genesis of the human subject occurs through language on the traditional model of language, where it is generally understood as a tool of direct reference or an instrument the self merely employs to translate preformed thoughts. Rather, only on the understanding that language is autonomous can we begin to understand the claim that language actually *forms* the human subject.

The narrative view of the self, that the self is formed through self-narration, places us into what we might think of, following the title of a book by Roman Jackobson, as "the prison house of language." This thesis places us in such a situation because it accounts for selfhood without reference to non-linguistic considerations. In an article entitled "The Language of the Self," Anthony Kerby argues sagaciously in favour of this thesis, deflecting common sense objections by attempting to demonstrate precisely how the notion of narrative is all-pervasive in the multifarious experiences of human life. Since Kerby's argument is specifically intended to lend support to this thesis against some very general objections, a mention of some of the argument's main points serves well to highlight some of the central tenets of the thesis and how they may be defended.

One of the main points of the argument serves to show just how pervasive the notion of narration is in our life. Kerby argues that narrative is not simply a description of the way things are but is more akin to a fundamental structure that orders and brings meaning into our experience. Our dreams, hopes, disappointments, plans and doubts only make sense, he contends, in terms of narratives. "Much of our emotional life," he explains, "is bound up with the way we narrate experiences [....] Narrative [...] is not a simple description but rather an interpretation -- it is an important way in which our lives are understood" (214). He proceeds to cite Charles Taylor in Human Agency and Language (45-76) to support his point that even feelings and emotions contain a self-referential character in terms of a self-narrating subject, and that the substance of these feelings and emotions is actually shaped by language.

Just as the notion of narration is central and its clarification important, so too with the notion of discourse, which is drawn from the work of Emile Beneveniste. Beneveniste claims that discourse can be organized into three subjects.[3] First, there is the speaking subject, the agent of discourse; secondly, there is the subject of speech, a purely linguistic subject designated by personal pronouns; and thirdly, there is a spoken subject, which is the subject produced through discourse as a consequence of its result on an interlocuteur. Kerby's argument relies heavily upon the importance of the third subject, the spoken subject, an importance that is supported in the following passage from Beneveniste:

> what then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refer? It is solely a "reality of discourse," and this is a very strange thing. *I* cannot

[3] Cf. Kaja Silverman, 43-53.

> be defined except in terms of "locution," not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies "the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*" (quoted in Kaja Silverman, 46).

Only in this third stage as a spoken subject does the subject become embodied. "The body," explains Kerby, "is the *site of narration* and also the normal *site of ascription* for the subject of a personal narrative" (216). This duality, termed by Kerby a mediated reflexivity, is crucial, for it "yields a distinctly human body, a body with a 'subjective' history, a meaning, and therefore with a 'soul' -- it yields a person" (216).

Kerby's argument is attractive for it renders far more intelligible the notion of the poststructuralist subject. The self is no longer understood as a thing in the metaphysical sense of a substance residing beneath experience; the subject is thus decentred and, consequently, the Cartesian notion of the self as a substratum is left behind. The subject comes to be in and through the process of self-narration, which is pervasive in our lives and which involves a highly complex linguistic system of signs. In and through this complex system of linguistic signs and during the process of self-narration, the discoursing subject encounters his or her subjectivity, and Kerby attempts to explain how this subjectivity envelops the body, personal history and the immediate world of reference. Nevertheless, it is a subjectivity that is explained entirely in terms of the linguistic system. It could well be replied, then, that such an account is essentially disappointing, since in the end it allows these apparently essential non-linguistic elements -- such as our bodies and our experience -- to enter through the back-door. The problem in accounting for the very *formation* of the self in entirely *linguistic* terms is that it renders the subject into an almost unrecognizable form. What does it mean to

say that our bodies and our personal histories must be understood in terms of a linguistic system of signs? What Kerby's argument makes explicit, then, is that in the end the richness of the phenomena of lived experience is reduced to an abstract system of linguistic signs. In a certain sense, what occurs is that the subject is deconstructed in a manner that is inadequate to the phenomena.

At this point I should like to return to the work of Merleau-Ponty. It seems that Kerby has pinpointed a sharp reservation over this poststructuralist understanding of the subject, one that is, as I have attempted briefly to show, not easy to resolve. I believe, however, that such a response to this poststructuralist conundrum is present in the work of Merleau-Ponty. What is most interesting is that one need not abandon essential tenets of the poststructuralist theory; a response can be given that encompasses many basic elements thereof. In presenting this response, I would like to suggest how, by making inferences and extrapolations from Merleau-Ponty's work as it has been discussed in previous chapters, one can arrive at a richer theory of the speaking subject.

One of the most interesting things to note is precisely how influential the thought of Merleau-Ponty has been on this poststructuralist theory of the subject. There are at least two elemental aspects of the work of his middle-period that play a significant role in the poststructuralist theory as outlined above. First of all, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty goes as far as to allot to language a significant degree of self-consistency and autonomy: "le langage est quelque chose comme un être [...] quelque chose comme un univers, capable de loger en lui les choses mêmes, -- après les avoir changées en leur sens" (S., 54).[4] Secondly, Merleau-Ponty contends that our basic perceptual

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[4] The following passage from La Prose du monde states the same theme, though in a more indirect fashion: "il y a donc, certes, un intérieur du langage, une intention de signifier qui

experience of the world is itself a form of expression: "toute perception, et toute action qui la suppose, bref tout usage de notre corps est déjà *expression primordiale*" (P.M., 110). Proceeding immediately to qualify this claim, he contends that perception is not simply a secondary and derivative form of expression serving to tie together already established signs and meanings; rather, the actual perceptual experience of our body incarnate is the action whereby signs first become intelligible as signs:

> [c'est] l'opération qui d'abord constitue les signes en signes, fait habiter en eux l'exprimé, non pas sous la condition de quelque convention préalable, mais par l'éloquence de leur arrangement même et de leur configuration, implante un sens dans ce qui n'en avait pas, et qui donc, loin de s'épuiser dans l'instant où elle a eu lieu, ouvre un champ, inaugure un ordre, fonde une institution ou une tradition... (P.M., 110-111).

In previous chapters I have demonstrated the intrinsic affinity between this type of lived experience and silence; indeed, I have attempted to show how they are inextricably bound together. Nevertheless, I must now point out specific ways in which this fundamental affinity in Merleau-Ponty's thought of the middle period is actually paradoxical and ambiguous, especially given certain developments in the poststructuralist tradition.

As Kerby's argument makes explicit, and as we have seen Beneveniste testify to, one of the fundamental tenets of such a theory, whatever form it may take, is its reliance upon the notion of the primacy of language or of expression. One knows well that, after an initial encounter, a strict poststructuralist theory of the subject such as this one appears quite alien,

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anime les accidents linguistiques, et fait de la langue, à chaque moment, un système capable de se recouper et de se confirmer lui-même" (51).

mainly because of the crucial, radical shift in the importance of language. Nevertheless, adopting the view expressed above by Merleau-Ponty -- that the most fundamental experience of body-perception is itself a form of expression -- essentially introduces the understanding of language as a central and ubiquitous phenomenon in our experience of the world. Moreover, in the above passage Merleau-Ponty even claims that the perceptual experience of our body incarnate is not only itself a form of expression but is also that form of expression which constitutes signs as signs. The juxtaposition of his contention that pre-verbal perceptual experience is a form of expression with his contention that such experience demarcates the genesis of the sign system provides a stunning revelation of the tension present in his thinking between phenomenology and structuralism.

But because the structuralist thesis is present, the passage could well be read by one sympathetic to structuralism as lending credence to a theory of the subject grounded upon the ubiquity of language. Indeed, to say that body-perception is a form of expression is just to say that it is a form of language, albeit a pre-verbal form of language. Thus would this type of argument lend support to and serve as a runway for poststructuralism, especially given its insistence that body-perception constitutes signs as signs. With this type of support established, when the same philosophical work argues exhaustively for a certain degree of autonomy of language, it is indisputable that Merleau-Ponty has been enormously influential in this regard. On Merleau-Ponty's account, then, it is possible to construe the speaking subject as partially deconstructed by being stripped of authorial autonomy.

However, it is the differences, rather than the similitudes, that I find telling. And these differences come flooding in when one remembers one of the ways in which silence and language are inextricably interwoven. To

construe the speaking subject in terms similar to those of the poststructuralists involves a fundamental reconstrual of the immediacy of silent body-perception and lived experience. Consequently, the essential realm of the silence of lived experience must be recast, i.e., in terms of a language constituted by signs and differences. Now as Kerby's article demonstrates, a great deal of work is needed to render intelligible the general poststructuralist theory of the decentred self. Such support involves detailed argument and discussion with the goal of explaining precisely how the self and the world come into being in and through language *alone*.

My contention is that in insisting solely upon the linguistic aspect of perception a poststructuralist is indeed rejecting many essential aspects of being human that are accounted for within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Indeed, even Merleau-Ponty could be interpreted as arguing that there is no basic substratum of the self, just as the structuralists do, yet he does not dispense with our common realm of lived experience. Although he has said it in numerous ways throughout his career, perhaps his conviction of our attachment to the concrete *things themselves* of the life-world is best summed up in Le Visible et l'invisible: "ce sont les choses mêmes, du fond de leur silence, que [la philosophie] veut conduire à l'expression" (18). The most interesting thing to note is that in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language, while language retains an essential connection to the perceptual world of our lived experience, and is not explained away in terms of an abstract system of signs, as we have seen in previous chapter it is possible to argue that the speaking subject is formed in and through language. Reasoning that one's language develops and articulates new meaning, thus imparting knowledge to the speaking subject and bringing him or her into a new relationship with lived experience, it follows that in this very act language

also forms and articulates a new speaking subject. It is thus in these terms that the subject is only complete in and through his or her articulation of experience, where lived experience is understood as *incarnate* experience. Following this line of reasoning we have in essence dispensed with the Cartesian notion of the subject as substratum and arrived at the conception of the subject as someone who creates him or herself anew through writing and speaking. Such a theory of language and subjectivity is, I believe, far more holistic, for it guards intact our lived experience without contorting it first into an abstract system of signs. To be sure, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, there is a sense in which language does contort our experience of the world; but in a characteristically paradoxical fashion, Merleau-Ponty affirms that it nevertheless remains intimately bound to it: "la parole en us sens reprend et surmonte, mais en un sens conserve et continue la certitude sensible, elle ne perce jamais tout à fait le 'silence éternel' de la subjectivité privée" (P.M., 61). There is thus no prison-house of language after all.[5]

The reader may object here that we are leaving him or her with numerous questions unanswered and yet more pressing issues to be taken up. But the purpose of the present work is to render clear what was obscure, to juxtapose some essential elements of the phenomena that were merely implicit beforehand. I have endeavoured to draw my own conclusions, and if I have left the reader with the impression that the enquiry is really just beginning, then I am glad to have led the way into a labyrinthine structure of ambiguities and paradoxes, so that the reader may take up pen and paper for

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[5] P.M., 29 and 146.

him or herself and forge his or her own way along the varied and intersecting paths of language.

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